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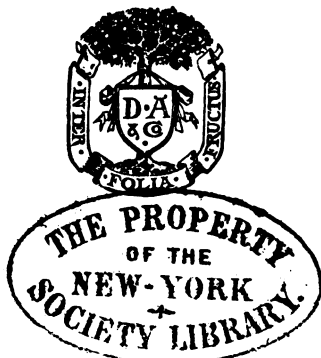
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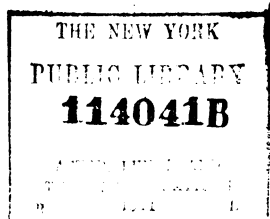
DOROTHEA GERARD

AUTHOR OF ETELKA'S VOW, A QUEEN OF CURDS AND CREAM,
ON THE WAY THROUGH, LADY BABY, ETC.
AND JOINT AUTHOR OF REATA, A SENSITIVE PLANT, ETC.

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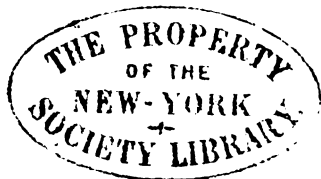


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AN ARRANGED MARRIAGE.

CHAPTER I.

EN FAMILLE.

ON the 7th day of November of the year 188—some two dozen people, the majority of whom called each other by their Christian names, were assembled round the dinner-table of Morton Abbey. The ladies had their hair and the gentlemen their cravats ordered not more than six months behind the latest London fashion, and both ladies and gentlemen had that common air of peacefulness peculiar to people who have always had enough to eat, and have not ruined either their nerves or their tempers over politics. The look was marked enough to create a sort of family likeness, and in point of fact they were a family party, though only in the wider sense of the word. The old men had been rivals in their youth for the affections of these same old ladies who now looked out upon the world so peaceably from beneath their silver-grey curls; the young men and the young women had all known each other in brown holland pinafores, and were now beginning to tread the round already trodden by their parents by finding each other very pleasant to look upon in silk dinner-gowns and dress-coats. It had been so in Blankshire from time immemorial. Up to this point county society had maintained itself tri-

umphantly intact from the admixture of baser elements. Though there was no Croesus among them all, yet neither had any elder son ever been reduced to the necessity of "marrying money," and thus tearing a breach in the Chinese wall of exclusiveness with which Blankshire society loved to think itself surrounded. Marrying money is a somewhat modern accomplishment, and in this corner of rural England even the educated classes had not quite marched with the age. They had married and intermarried for so long that it was the rule and not the exception that no man could take an hour's walk without meeting somebody who was, at the very least, his third or fourth cousin. And thus it came about that everybody knew everything about everybody. It is a favourite joke of Lord Collingswood, who sits at the head of the dinner-table to-day—an old gentleman with soft, white hair, and a pink face so delicately cut that it might have been a cameo packed in jeweller's cotton—to boast that he has sung "Rock-a-bye Baby" to every one of his guests under forty years of age. Mr. Haldane, the puffy man with the white eyelashes, who always has something to say which is of no consequence whatever, distinctly remembers the day on which Jenny Linwood, the pretty blonde beside him, solemnly buried her last doll; while Sir George Claverstone, the tall, highbred man on Miss Linwood's left, whose mind is absorbed in cultivating a calmness of demeanour almost disconcerting to strangers, finds himself a good deal hampered in his *rôle* by these common memories, for it is not easy to play the born philosopher in the very face of people who have seen you howling over a dead guinea-pig, or running for your life from the gardener with your pockets full of apricots.

The old lady next to Sir George is Lady Malvern, and her principal delight in life is to pick holes in her friends'



pedigrees, for which occupation, however, Blankshire offers her a very limited field. She nurses a perpetual hatred against one of her ancestors who, as she asserts, ruined the looks of the family by marrying somebody with a snub nose. Indeed, it rarely happens that Lady Malvern manages to talk to a stranger for five minutes together without airing her fury about the family nose.

"A snub nose!" she loves to grind out from between her gold-stuffed teeth, "of all common things it is the commonest. Look at me! If it had not been for my thrice unfortunate nose I would have been a beauty in my youth. For two centuries at least our features have been strictly classical, and now a snub nose on the top of it! I ask you: Is it not cruel?"

The "horsey"-looking man who comes next—horsey-looking in spite of his indifferently made dress-coat—is the Honourable Mr. Paton, celebrated for knowing how to take fences and not knowing how to dress himself. It is told of him that at a garden-party in the neighbouring county, while helping people into their carriages, a lady, misled by his leggings, his jockey cap, and his undeniable bow legs, had given him a shilling. He tells the story with great gusto and keeps the shilling under glass.

Then follow in proper succession several young ladies and young gentlemen with different shades of flaxen hair, and about whom there is absolutely nothing to be said except that they look healthy and happy. Next comes a lady of uncertain years, whose face is adorned with an eternal nervous grin, whether the subject of conversation be births, deaths, or marriages. Major Morris, a thin, brown man, without an ounce of superfluous flesh about him, and hampered with an *idée fixe* that he is sarcastic, has taken this lady in to dinner.

Straight opposite to the Major there sits an elderly gen-

tleman whom his friends revere as the very last surviving Whig of unmixed opinions, the sort of man who reads the *Edinburgh Review* conscientiously, and talks of "the deep baying of the bloodhound of democracy."

"Baxter doesn't know it," the Major is fond of saying, "but he'll be in a museum some day."

On the left of the sarcastic Major sits Miss Nelton, a graceful brunette, and next to her again there comes an empty place.

Miss Nelton, being in her teens and tender-hearted, could not look at the unclaimed table-napkin quite unmoved.

"Fred's soup will be getting cold," she remarked to the Major, "I wonder what is keeping him so long?"

"His moustaches," answered the Major promptly. "He won't have got the tips quite *Parisian* enough yet."

Miss Nelton looked at her neighbour reproachfully. "That is unkind; you shouldn't hit a person when he is down, you know."

"Of course not; but he isn't down a bit—not in spirits, at any rate, whatever may be his luck. It was nothing but his uproarious humour that he had to thank for that crop-per to-day. I believe that mare would have turned out the best hunter in the county."

"It was foolish, of course, and yet it's like Fred to do things like that. I wonder how he can be in such spirits. Papa says that the Farrington affairs are going just as badly as possible. He thinks the establishment will have to be shut up or something. Wouldn't that be terrible?"

The Major said "Hum," not being able on the spur of the moment to think of anything more sarcastic to say.

At the other end of the table the empty place was likewise absorbing attention.

"He denies it point blank, but the fall must have given

him a shake," Mr. Haldane was sententiously remarking as he blinked his white eyelashes. "Big jumps are all very well, but ask Paton if any man in his senses has ever taken Tom White's garden wall!"

While everybody looked towards Mr. Paton as an authority on this subject Lord Collingswood quietly observed:—

"Perhaps he wasn't in his senses."

The faces turned from Mr. Paton to Lord Collingswood.

"What on earth do you mean?"

"I only mean that I didn't like the way Alleyne rode at that wall. Unless he had been drinking I can't explain it. And I didn't like the way he looked at the mare after she was down."

"Oh, Lord Collingswood!" came from Miss Nelton. "I am sure Fred was terribly sorry that her legs were broken."

"I am sure he was. But I am not sure that he wasn't sorrier that it wasn't his own neck that was broken instead."

A pause of consternation followed all round the table. Young and old looked towards their white-haired host, who at that moment might have sat for the great-grandfather of the whole party. All the faces had become grave except that of the lady with the perpetual nervous grin, over which apparently her will exercised no control worth mentioning.

It was one of the healthy, happy youths who first broke silence.

"But, by Jove! why should Alleyne want to do anything of the sort? It's two years since I've seen him in such good spirits as he was in to-day. I even said to him before we were off this morning: 'You've brought good news from London with you; now haven't you? You look

like it.' And he actually burst out laughing, and said : ' Oh, first-rate ; you'll hear all about it presently ! ' "

" Have you ever heard of such a thing as *Galgenhumor* ? " inquired Lord Collingswood as quietly as before.

Some of the persons present had heard of it and some had not, but nobody quite knew what to make of the word which, literally translated, produced such a strange result as " Gallows humour." While they were disputing over it the door opened, and the conversation necessarily came to a standstill, for Mr. Alleyne had entered.

The possessor of Farringdon was a fair-haired, consumptive-looking man of about thirty, with a slight stoop, and marks of hard living in his face. Distant acquaintances who met him only at long intervals were invariably surprised to find him still above earth. " Oh, Alleyne," they were accustomed to say on hearing his name mentioned, " do you mean to say that *he* is still alive ? " Mr. Alleyne had outlived several of the questioners, and, in spite of his narrow shoulders, seemed disposed to outlive a good number more, as this class of individual often does.

In the time of Fred's father Farringdon had been the great house of the country, and Fred himself was the first Alleyne who for generations past had not been Master of the Hounds. It was not entirely his fault, seeing that the ruin of the house had begun before his time, but doubtless this ruin had been greatly accelerated by his own doings. With economy all might yet have been well, but he had started by declaring that economy was not his style, and that he preferred to live for ten years on a princely footing rather than to scrape up shillings for fifty. The county had been a good deal startled by this declaration, although it was well known that Fred was always either doing or saying startling things. Indeed, to be startling seemed to be his one object in life. He delighted in mak-

ing such assertions as that he didn't admire Shakespeare, or that it had been a mistake to annex India, merely for the sake of being gaped at.

And now the ten years of princely living had come to an end. In justice to Fred Alleyne it must be observed that these ten years were all that he had expected to live, but his lungs had played him a trick by proving tougher than the doctors had supposed them. Nobody quite knew what was going to happen next, though everybody would have liked very much to know, for Fred, having been left an orphan in very early years, had been in a sort of way adopted by his neighbours *en masse*, who had vied with each other in making much of him, partly in memory of the great days of Farringdon, and partly in pity for the darker days now closing around him. It was known that he had lost heavily at Ascot, and though of late he had become extremely reticent, it was evident that since summer some sort of cloud was threatening to burst. Quite lately he had gone up to London to meet his creditors, and had returned from there only two days ago. The question as to what exactly had taken place in London was occupying everybody's mind. For the space of five minutes Lord Collingswood's words continued to weigh a little upon the mind of the company, but by the end of that time almost everyone present had veered round to the opinion of the flaxen-haired young man who felt certain that Fred must have brought good news from London.

To say that he was in good spirits would have been to say too little—he was absolutely boisterous. He had begun by entering the room with a curious air of jauntiness not observable in his usual demeanour, and with a flush upon his hollow cheek which, as the Major could not refrain from observing to his neighbour, ought not to have been there before dinner. Once seated it took him less than a

minute to get the conversation under way again all round the table. He wanted to know what they had been talking about; he was quite sure it was about himself. Was it his vices or his virtues which they had been discussing? Probably the latter; everybody knew that he had none of the former worth mentioning. Then he turned to Ada Nelton and almost frightened her by the intensity with which he whispered: "I am sure *you* said nothing bad about me." Before she had time to answer he had already turned to someone else with a joke about some incident in to-day's run. When asked whether the mare had been shot, he answered airily: "Bless her, yes; may her soul rest in peace,"—a remark which caused several old ladies to turn pale. But there is nothing so infectious as a boisterous mood, and though among the elder people some began to wonder whether the fall had left Fred's head quite uninjured, and though the Major, having first looked at the decanter, exchanged a significant look across the table with the man whom he expected to see in a museum some day, yet the young people, whose blood was warmed by to-day's successful run, rapidly entered into the spirit of joviality, and the dinner passed off amidst a general gaiety that was almost a little noisy. But through it all Fred Alleyne remained the leader. The nearer it grew to dessert time the broader did the jokes become which Fred exchanged with the men and the more reckless the compliments which he paid to the ladies. When he had reached the point of calling upon Lady Malvern to drink to the health of the ancestor to whom the family owed its present shape of nasal organ, the hostess thought it was time to catch her chief guest's eye, for even in a family party there are limits to be observed. With something of a sigh of relief she heard the dining-room door close behind her.

It was Fred Alleyne who had insisted on ushering the

ladies out, though others had been nearer than he was. He came back to his place slowly, with his napkin in his hand. The flaxen-haired youths looked towards him expectantly, ready for a burst of that freer gaiety in which it had now become possible to indulge. But this time they were disappointed. From the moment that he had again sat down Fred's mood seemed to have changed. He had become silent, almost morose. He emptied a few more glasses of wine, but he gave short and ungracious answers to the questions addressed to him. It was not until Lord Collingswood was beginning to show symptoms of rising that Fred underwent another transformation. He raised his head quickly, and in a moment the flush had again mounted to his cheek, and his eyes had begun to shine.

"Not yet," he said; "we mustn't go yet. I have still got something to do."

"You had better be quick about it then," said a young man who was growing impatient to rejoin a young lady in the drawing-room.

"Yes, I shall be quick, very quick," laughed Alleyne, with a sudden return to his former joviality of manner, only this time his voice did not sound so steady as before, and no one could help feeling that the laugh was overdone. "All we need is a bottle of champagne, and I promise to do the thing at once. They are all empty you see, Lord Colly," and he turned insinuatingly towards his host, whom he had not called "Lord Colly" since he was ten years old. "May I ring for another bottle of champagne?"

The men round the table looked at him in wide-eyed astonishment. How and where was all this going to end?

"Stop," said Lord Collingswood, whose delicate pink face had suddenly hardened. "What's all this nonsense? You don't need more wine. Why, you're drunk, boy, already."

Alleyne turned with his hand upon the bell.

"I give you my word that I am not drunk," he said in a voice that shook with eagerness. "I am as sober as you are, but I have got somebody's health to drink, and I must have wine to drink it in. May I ring? Say yes, please, dear Lord Colly!"

A movement of interest went through the company. The old man gazed hard at the young one, hesitated for a moment, and then gave a sign of assent.

A few minutes later the champagne glasses were being filled, and all faces were turned towards Fred Alleyne, who stood with his knuckles on the table, leaning a little forward, and staring in turn into the expectant eyes of each of his friends. He had not spoken yet; once he had made a beginning, but his cough had come on, and he had sipped a mouthful of champagne, in doing which he had spilled some on the back of his hand, which had seemed to him so comical that he had been forced to laugh, though no one had joined in the laugh this time. After that his throat required a little time to settle down, and he did not hurry, as though enjoying the suspense which he had created. As he looked into one pair of eyes after another he could almost read what they were waiting for. One expected this, the other that, but not one among them all looked for what was coming. When his gaze had gone the round of the table, he drew up his stooping figure, squared his narrow shoulders, and feverishly grasped his glass.

"My friends," he began in his high-pitched voice, "I told you that I had somebody's health to drink, and I never tell lies. You want to know whose, don't you? And one of you wanted to know what news I had brought from London. Very well, I am going to answer both questions at once. Don't be afraid; it won't be a long speech. All you have got to do is to take hold of your glasses and to

drink with me to the health of the new possessor of Farringdon."

Some of the men—the majority of whom had been indistinctly looking for something in the shape of a bridal toast—had already raised their glasses from mere force of habit, and not yet having quite grasped the sense of the last words, but before a single mouthful had been drunk all the glasses were put down again, and every man looked into his neighbour's face in order to see there whether he had heard aright. Mr. Haldane's white eyelashes worked in double quick time, and even Sir George Claverstone, who made a point of never being surprised at anything, could not quite suppress a very slight start.

"Fred, my boy," said Lord Collingswood after a long pause, "are you quite sure you know what you are talking about?"

Alleyne had sat down again, and was now, with an unsteady smile, reviewing the company, as though to note the effects of his *coup*. This time he had certainly succeeded in being gaped at to his heart's content.

"Yes, I rather fancy that I do know what I am talking about; the matter was explained to me very clearly, anyway."

"But, Fred——" began Lord Collingswood again, rather shakily this time.

"Farringdon sold!" burst out one of the younger men. "It's simply impossible."

"Why?" asked Alleyne, turning fiercely upon him.

"Well, because—because nobody who isn't called Alleyne has ever been at Farringdon, and because—well, just because one can't fancy anyone else there."

"You'll have to make your imagination work harder then?" said Alleyne with an ugly sneer. "I tell you that somebody whose name is as different as possible from Al-

leyne will be cleaning his boots on the Farringdon door-scraper before the month is out."

"But who is the man?" asked the indiscreet youth, and his indiscretion loosed the tongues of the others.

"But when did it happen?" asked one.

"How could it possibly be?"

"And what are you going to do yourself?"

Alleyne answered only the first of the questions.

"It is a man who has more money than I have," he said with something very like a sob, though the smile still flickered about his nervous lips. "I've called upon you to drink his health—you won't? Well, then, I'm losing time; there's nothing else for me to do here, except to wish you better luck than I've had. There are too many of you to shake hands with all round, so you must just believe me without it. Good-bye, Lord Colly, and may you live to be a hundred."

He was on his feet already, and was wringing Lord Collingswood's beautiful pink hand so savagely that it almost seemed as though it must break off. Then, before any one had quite realised what his intention was, the dining-room door had closed behind him. During a few moments his weak cough was heard in the hall, and immediately there followed the sound of wheels grinding through the gravel. One or two of the guests remembered now that they had heard this same sound during dinner, and had wondered whose carriage could be coming round between two courses. To everyone who knew Fred Alleyne—and all present knew him rather better than their own pockets—it became evident that the closing scene had been carefully prepared. Since he had to disappear it was "like Fred" to wish to disappear with a flash in the pan.

In their first astonishment some of the guests had risen; Lord Collingswood hurried into the hall, but came back

again presently, shaking his head, and sank despondently into his chair. Then everybody began to talk at once. So it was true, after all. Until this moment it had still appeared possible that the thing would prove a joke. That chance was gone now ; there remained only a naked fact to reckon with. After this evening Fred would have ceased to belong to Blankshire. How was Blankshire going to bear the blow ? What was going to become of this petted lost sheep ? It was known that he had a distant relative in Australia. Was he going to emigrate ? Opinions differed greatly. Mr. Haldane held forth unceasingly even when not listened to, while the Major, on the contrary, had to content himself with looking impenetrable. Sarcasm was not suitable for the occasion, he well knew, and to make commonplace remarks would have undermined his reputation.

At the end of several minutes of surmises somebody ventured the question, "But how about the new man ?"

This turned the mind of the company from regret to curiosity, for a great deal depended for Blankshire on the possessor of Farrington. Not a soul present had a clue to go by.

"It's bad enough its not being one of us," said Mr. Haldane, squaring his puffy figure, "but will it be the right sort of man ?"

Every guest looked silently into his wineglass. They were all thinking of the same thing.

"It's a man who has got more money than I have," Fred had said. Now, money can be either inherited or acquired, and the dread of seeing the great house of the county fall into the hands of that terrible product of modern times, the *nouveau riche*, was weighing upon everybody's mind at that moment.

"We don't want any strangers among us," said Mr. Paton, bringing down his closed hand upon the table. "The idea of having a fellow at Farringdon who doesn't know his right stirrup from his left one!"

The idea was so appalling that they all looked instinctively towards their host, as though for guidance.

Lord Collingswood raised himself from his despondent attitude. He felt that he was expected to do something.

"My friends," he said—he had almost said "my children"—"it's no use breaking our heads over the new man; we'll see him sooner than we care to, and, whoever he is, he won't be Freddy—that's the chief point. Whether we can make him welcome among us must depend upon himself; but one point seems to me quite clear—we're not going to drink to his health until we know more about him. I vote, therefore, that poor Freddy's toast be turned inside out. The glasses are full—let us empty them, not to the name of the new possessor of Farringdon, but to the memory of the late one."

The champagne disappeared amidst approving acclamations. Though it was not expressed in so many plain words, yet the toast had virtually been drunk quite as much to the destruction of the "new man" as to the prosperity of the old one. It was as though they had tacitly bound themselves to a league against the intruder.

That evening at Morton Abbey the ladies waited long for the appearance of the gentlemen. They, too, had heard the weak cough in the hall, followed by the slamming of the hall-door. Some of them had raised their heads for a moment, but no one thought of connecting this with the long delay in the dining-room.

It was on this particular evening that the meaning of the word *Galgenhumor* dawned upon the minds of several

of the company. They would not formerly have believed that a man with a rope round his neck could manage to laugh, but Fred had shown them that this was quite possible, though the sound of that laugh had not been altogether pleasant to listen to—now that they came to think of it.

CHAPTER II.

THE INTRUDER.

THE East was beginning to turn white with a first faint suspicion of daylight, when the last carriage—it was only a cab—rolled from the door of Farringdon Manor. Mr. Brand turned thoughtfully back into the house. The spaces inside, deserted except for the servants, were still ablaze with light. In the dancing-room some scraps of coloured *tulle* were scattered over the floor. Upon a chair in the corner there lay a crushed bouquet; not far off, on a table, a forgotten glove. Through the open door of the supper-room Mr. Brand could see the crumpled napkins and the dregs of the champagne in the glasses.

In the long back drawing-room a small, sleepy woman in red satin was obviously waiting for orders. She wore so many diamonds about her that a person with weak eyes could not have looked at her steadily for more than a couple of seconds at a time, and she herself was the most meagre of excuses for such a display of splendour. As her husband entered she roused herself with a start. Mr. Brand sat down opposite to his wife, undid a couple of his waistcoat buttons, and stretched his legs in front of him. The ball had been an experiment—had it been a success? The same question was in both their minds, though neither spoke at once.

It was Mrs. Brand who first broke silence.

"The Malverns must have been prevented from coming," she observed, in a nervous whisper. "Perhaps her ladyship's—I mean Lady Malvern's—toothache came on again."

"Is toothache infectious?" inquired Mr. Brand, frowning at his boots.

"No, Tom—I mean Thomas. But they may all have been taken up with her, mightn't they, and too anxious to go?"

"And the Haldanes?"

"That could have been a mistake, surely. Mistakes about messages *do* happen sometimes, don't they? And really, Thomas, I do think the dance went off just as well as could be," she added, in a yet more terrified whisper.

"Well, it was a downright sight," admitted Mr. Brand, deliberately examining the heel of his boot. "I don't believe the neighbourhood has seen anything to come near it within the century. We'll see if they go on turning up those fine noses of theirs after this. A hundred pounds for the band, and a mile and a half of avenue lighted as clear as day. If this doesn't do it I don't know what will," he added meditatively. "Well, we'll see."

Mr. Brand went to bed, still repeating to himself at intervals, "This ought to do it; yes, this certainly ought to do it—well, we'll see," and divesting himself the while of his much abhorred though excellently made evening clothes; while Mrs. Brand slipped out of her red satin with a sigh of relief, and laid her diamonds back into their case, hastily and nervously, almost as though she were afraid of burning her finger-tips at their sparks.

Thomas Brand looked exactly what he was—a workman dressed up. His large, unwieldy figure had obviously not yet grown used to the attire adopted by society, his huge hands still showed the hardness, almost the blisters, of

manual labour. His movements were clumsy, and his manners were considered by himself to be almost hopeless. He had worked all his life, and now he meant to enjoy himself, only the worst was that he did not know how to set about it. And yet it was for this that he had worked. All his life the country gentleman had been his ideal. He had become a workman only in order to become a "squire." Close to the village home where he had been born there had stood the walls of a princely park, and every Sunday he had taken up his post beside the gate in order to watch the squire driving forth to church. This particular squire was old and his equipage far behind the fashion, for nobody nowadays has his carriage seats covered with violet-coloured velvet, nor his horses harnessed with brass-embazoned leather. And yet it was precisely this brass that first sowed the seed of ambition in the village lad's soul. For him it grew to be the embodiment of worldly pomp and social distinction. As the heavy gates closed behind the carriage and he cast a lingering glance into the sacred precincts of the great park, he would say to himself that surely there could be nothing more desirable than being a squire, and having one's horses harnessed with brass-encrusted leather.

Throughout the whole of his successful career he had never lost sight of his ideal. The one spark of imagination which existed in his eminently prosaic nature had helped him more than any of his practical instincts, though no one suspected its presence, and though he himself was almost ashamed of it. Never, except at night after the close of his work, or on some quiet Sunday afternoon, would he draw forth the picture of his future from the hidden recesses of his mind, and amuse himself with it, half guiltily, much as a child might play with a forbidden toy. In such moments even the brass harness would flash obstinately in the fore-

ground of his thoughts, for Thomas Brand was a strong man with two or three weaknesses, and this particular shape of social ambition happened to be one of them.

All this time the practical details of his plan stood firm. Even the exact capital was fixed which he intended to possess before laying down his tools. He was fifty when the moment came at last.

Such was the man who had broken into the sacred circle of Blankshire society. There had been no difficulty in becoming a "squire," in so far as acquiring an estate with a park-wall and a gate even more imposing than the one of his childhood's recollections was concerned; but this was not all that was wanted, it seemed. When he began to discover that people were not calling, his astonishment and disappointment knew no bounds. He had shut up his workshop for ever and entered upon his new life with an almost childish glee, never doubting for a moment that his money would do everything for him. Neither as a workman in a big manufactory, nor later on while speculating "in iron" with his wife's moderate fortune, had he had time to study the nicer shades of social distinction. It was only now that he began to perceive certain outward differences between himself and his neighbours. Perhaps these were the root of the evil. Immediately he ordered a book recommended to him under the title of *Errors in the Use of English*, and from henceforward shut himself up with a copy-book for an hour daily in the library, while Mrs. Brand received strict orders about reminding him to wash his hands before luncheon. With perspiring brow he would doggedly plod through his self-imposed task. Having made up his mind to get into society it struck him as only fair to help society over a few of the roughest obstacles.

"Do you think I don't see them wince when I drop an 'h?'" he would say to the entirely passive Mrs. Brand.

"And I don't blame them, either; it *is* hard upon them, brought up as they have been. One just has to make concessions to this class of people," he would add, with a curious mixture of scorn and awe.

Despite these concessions the new squire of Farrington continued to occupy an isolated position. His fellow-squires neither clapped him on the shoulder, nor called him "old boy," nor in any other minor way acknowledged the fellowship, and yet it was exactly after these so significant details that he had secretly hankered for years. But the man was far from beaten. His obstinacy was of the dogged kind. All his life he had been accustomed to make his way with squared fists and clenched teeth; baronets were to him a new sort of obstacle, but he had no idea of having his hard-earned playtime made a mess of by any of their ridiculous prejudices. His neighbours must either open their doors or have them run in. Some other means must be thought of, since it was evident that the copy-books alone would not do it. It was then that he hit upon the idea of the ball. Not an ordinary ball, of course, but one which should outdo all the ball-going experience of the neighbourhood. The guests had necessarily to be imported, though it never became exactly known where from. For two days Farrington Manor was filled to the very garrets with ladies and gentlemen in fashionable attire, and with excellent appetites, about whom there did not seem to be anything particularly wrong at first sight, but whose names and faces were strange to the entire country-side. Even the village inn was overflowing with them for one night. Former friends of Mr. Brand, Lord Collingswood had charitably decided, while it was declared by others—with the Major at their head—that the entire company had been hired out *en bloc* for the night by the same London house which supplied the ices and the flowers. Mrs. Brand's

diamond necklace had been purchased expressly for the occasion of the ball, while as for himself Mr. Brand, being absolutely without confidence in his own taste, had simplified matters by getting down a Westend tailor.

"Make me look as like a gentleman as you can," had been the sum of his orders.

And now the experiment was over, and there remained but to await the result. This Mr. and Mrs. Brand set about doing each after a fashion of their own. Mr. Brand's fashion consisted in walking from one window to the other, and drumming on the panes in expectation of the visitors whose social prejudices he firmly believed himself to have reduced to a confused heap at last. Mrs. Brand did nothing beyond watching her husband. She was living in a state of passive terror. When he stood and peered through the window-panes she felt terrified of a visitor coming, because of having to receive him; and at the same time she felt terrified of his not coming, because of the effect upon Tom. Each time he turned back from his outlook she cast a glance of scared inquiry at his face and pretended to be immersed in her needle-work.

At first Mr. Brand could not bring himself to believe that the "swells" had actually dared not to be dazzled by his money. What finally opened his eyes were a few lines in the local paper, which hitherto had taken no notice of the entertainment at Farringdon, and now referred to it only at second-hand, while speaking of a carpet-dance at Morton Abbey as "one of those refined and tasteful entertainments to which we are far more used than to the noisy display of mere banknotes."

On the afternoon of the day on which he had read this paragraph Mr. Brand unexpectedly ordered the carriage. During ten days he had not left the house for fear of missing a visitor, and Mrs. Brand, whose appetite and sleep

were beginning to suffer from the continual strain, thankfully accepted the suggestion.

"They shan't think I'm hiding, anyway," he had said with a savage laugh, for the first time acknowledging his defeat in words.

It was a breezy April day, and Mrs. Brand began by feeling giddy with the rush of the keen air. She had always been a somewhat shaky little body, and luxurious living has got to be cautiously practised before it can be indulged in with impunity. Even this drive had its drawbacks. She could not catch the right angle for leaning back among the cushions, and the horses seemed to her to be going at a dangerous pace. The drive, having no particular object in view beyond that of being a sort of vague challenge to the neighbourhood at large, could not escape having a somewhat aimless look about it. When the gates, both of Brindley Castle and of Morton Abbey, had twice been passed at a slackened trot, James was told to drive down the High Street of Blairnie, for all that Mr. Brand wanted was to be seen by as many people as possible. It was getting on for the hour of afternoon tea, an hour at which business is apt to be slack, and Mr. Filmer, the grocer, with a somewhat premature straw hat covering his iron-grey locks, and his hands folded behind his broad and eminently respectable back, was enjoying some conversation on his doorstep with Mr. Glenn, the barber, and Mr. Hotson, the chemist. As the Farringdon carriage came clattering down the street the barber and the chemist first looked over their shoulders and then inquiringly at Mr. Filmer. But Mr. Filmer, who stood a step higher than the others, with his face towards the street, evidently did not feel called upon to make any change in his attitude, and seeing the straw hat sitting as securely as ever in its place the two felts remained where they were.

Mrs. Brand stole a side-long glance at her husband. During the whole of the drive he had been ominously silent, and neither did he speak now, but his face looked rather grey, and he stared very straight in front of him.

"They may not have known the carriage," she timidly suggested, to which he only replied by telling James to drive on.

About a mile beyond Blairnie James pulled up the horses rather suddenly.

"Drive on!" said Mr. Brand impatiently.

"Something in the way, sir," said James.

A dogcart with the wheel off was obstructing the passage, while the groom held a plunging horse, and Sir George Claverstone, his hands deep down in the pockets of his overcoat, was contemplating the scene with philosophical calmness and a cigarette between his teeth.

"Dear me, an accident!" came from Mrs. Brand's startled lips.

"Only a slight *contretemps*," said Sir George, unearthing one of his hands in order first to remove the cigarette and then to raise his hat to Mrs. Brand. "I am sorry to be in the way, but that beast won't stand where he ought to."

"How are you going to get home?" asked Mr. Brand abruptly.

His first impulse had been to chuckle quite undisguisedly at the sight of his enemy stranded in mid-road, for Sir George was at that moment as much his personal enemy as any of the other obdurate fellow-squires. But then in an instant he had seen his chance.

"How are you going to get home? I don't believe that wheel will hold, even if you patch it on."

"I am certain it will not," said Sir George pleasantly, "because there is something wrong about the axle."

"Couldn't I give you a lift?" blurted out Mr. Brand, turning scarlet with the excitement of the moment. "Your place isn't so very much beyond mine, you know, and the horses are quite able for the extra bit of work. I always feed my horses well."

"Thanks extremely," said Sir George, still critically watching the restive horse, "but I could never dream of interrupting your drive."

"But I was going to turn back at any rate, wasn't I, Polly—Mary, I mean? It's no interruption," persisted Mr. Brand, growing a little hotter. "There's plenty of room, Sir George."

"You are extremely kind," said the baronet, dragging out his words a trifle more than was his habit, as though endeavouring thereby to gain time for reflection. "But the fact is I am not making for home now, I am——" he unearthed his right hand once more, meditatively knocked the ashes off his cigarette, and then deliberately concluded: "I am on my way to the station."

Judging from the position of the dogcart this sounded, to say the least, improbable.

"Then I'll take you to the station," decided Mr. Brand with an audible sigh of disappointment. Even this would be better than nothing at all.

Sir George was incapable of looking perplexed, but as his eyes moved carefully first up and then down the road he was nevertheless calling upon every hawthorn and ash tree within sight for counsel in his necessities. Though he did not see the way out of it yet he was immovably determined, happen what might, not to be borne off in triumph by "the new man." His philosophy might possibly have helped him over the social difficulty, but in this matter he considered himself responsible to the entire county.

"You are extraordinarily kind," he remarked, in exactly

the same tone, "but there is no reason for incommoding yourself. I mean to walk."

"You can't catch the 5.30 if you walk; it's out of the question."

"Then I shall"—Sir George looked up and down the road once more—"I shall be overtaken by the Blairnie fly before I'm far," he continued, as the happy thought for which he had been scanning the horizon opportunely struck him. "The Golden Crown sends a vehicle to meet every single train, you know. It will be coming along presently."

The homeward drive was even less cheerful than the start had been. On the reaction of his failure Mr. Brand had plunged back into a yet gloomier silence than before. James had received the order to drive home by another way. It was a bit of a roundabout, but Mr. Brand was not in the humour now for the Blairnie High Street. Had he been able to clatter past Mr. Filmer's shop sitting cheek by jowl with Sir George Claverstone, matters would have stood altogether differently. The plan had struck him as a triumph of cunning. Not being of a suspicious nature he did not distinctly doubt Sir George's story, but neither could he quite rid himself of an undefined idea that he was somehow being humbugged.

As a little beyond Farringdon Mr. Brand's carriage turned from the side track on to the high road it was brought face to face with a dogcart which was coming at a brisk trot from the direction of Blairnie. It was beginning to grow dusk by this time, but there remained more than light enough to recognise that Mr. Haldane was driving and that the person beside him was Sir George Claverstone. The politeness with which he raised his hat on meeting Mr. Brand's eyes was as faultless as the gravity of his handsome highbred countenance.

Mrs. Brand half uttered an exclamation and then swal-

lowed it again. This time she did not dare to look at her husband. She knew, without being told, what his face would be like. He sat there with his fists upon his knees and the same stupefied glare upon his face with which he had responded to Sir George's bow. He could not help understanding now. He even remembered suddenly and quite distinctly that there had not been so much as a hand-bag in Sir George's vehicle. The matter was as clear as daylight. Mr. Haldane was "one of them," and he, Thomas Brand, was not "one of them"—that was all. His boorish features were livid with passion. "That man shall lick my shoes yet," he said aloud and very deliberately, accompanying his words with an indecorous workman's oath.

That evening while dressing for dinner Mrs. Brand perceived, to her discomfiture, that the looking-glass showed an inclination to rock gently on its hinges like a cradle. Twice she put out her hand to straighten it, and twice grasped the empty air instead, having miscalculated her distance by a good quarter of a yard. At the same time she perceived that the palms of her hands were moist and cold and that the floor of the room was no longer absolutely straight. She wondered how she never before had noticed that the carpet went up-hill towards the wall. She clutched at the edge of the dressing-table to right herself, but again miscalculated her distance, and before her maid guessed what was happening, Mrs. Brand had slipped from her chair and fallen quietly in a very small heap on the floor.

Mr. Brand was as much startled as perplexed when brought to the bedside of his wife. Fainting-fits were known to him only by hearsay as one of those things in which the higher classes indulge. In his working-days it would have angered much more than it startled him to see Polly lying there like a useless bundle, but the working-days were over, and he supposed she had as good a right to

swoon away as any other lady in the land. Though he did not know it, the sight of his wife's bleached face lying rigid upon the pillow, and the very smell of the eau de Cologne used to revive her, raised him by several degrees in his own estimation.

"The collapse seems to be the result of a nervous strain," said Dr. Hopkins, who had been sent for.

"Nervous strain" was another of those expressions which fell with almost a flattering sound upon Thomas Brand's ear, though the impression it conveyed was cloudy.

"Ought she to take anything?" he inquired.

"If anything it ought to be iron, for her blood is undoubtedly poor; but it is not so much a question of taking as of being taken."

Dr. Hopkins paused for an acknowledgment of what struck him as a rather delicate play of words, but, seeing that he had not been wholly successful, was forced to explain.

"I mean that it is change of air that is wanted here. You should take her somewhere."

"But where to?" asked Mr. Brand, slightly aghast. "Surely she can't have better air than here."

"Perhaps not," said Dr. Hopkins, who was not entirely unaware of the lie of the land, "but the surroundings fall into the balance as heavily as the quality of the air. Take her to one of those German baths with iron springs; there's a choice of at least half-a-dozen at which you would find united both the physical and mental requisites wanted here."

At first sight Mr. Brand unhesitatingly rejected the idea of leaving Farringdon. He told himself that at this particular juncture the thing could not help looking like flight.

"They would think I'm beaten," he said to his wife, who on the second day after the fainting-fit had not yet

quitted her bed. "But I'm not beaten, and they shan't think so."

Mrs. Brand only smiled feebly in response. The chance of getting away for a time from this big house, which she did not know how to manage, and from these aristocratic neighbours, the mere mention of whom was enough to keep Thomas in a state of perpetually simmering rage, seemed to her like the chance of a respite from some great evil. But to express an opinion opposite to Thomas's was entirely out of the question. She feared the man with a terror which generally belongs only to the dread of physical violence, and which in her case was illogical, seeing that he had only struck her once since their marriage-day, and had on that occasion not been perfectly sober. Had she ever attempted to offer him opposition it might have been otherwise, for he was by nature simply incapable of brooking resistance. Indeed, it was by his ruthless energy, far more than by skill or shrewdness, that he had made his fortune as a man of business. He was not a born man of business, and would probably have been a success in other lines as well as this. This cast of man is almost certain to succeed in whatever calling he chooses, because it is his vigour that conquers the world rather than any special aptitude for any one vocation. He moves through life with his eyes upon the end he means to reach, treading under foot without discrimination whatever may come between him and his goal, unswayed by the emotions, and undisturbed by the perplexities from which less robust and more fine-grained natures have to suffer.

Mrs. Brand guessed all this, and, being small by nature, she instinctively made herself smaller yet, for fear of at any time being in the way.

At the end of a week Dr. Hopkins returned to the charge about the German baths. It was the very thing

wanted to set Mrs. Brand up again. He was a great believer in natural springs, and Lady Nelton had come back quite a different creature from the one he had sent her to last year.

"Do those people go to baths too?" Mr. Brand inquired with a clumsy sneer.

"Indeed they do. Some of the best English families are to be found every year at Wurmbad and Ottobad, besides the cream of foreign society. There's more of the world to be seen in six weeks at either of those baths than in six years of country life at home."

That evening, after Dr. Hopkins was gone, Mrs. Brand cleared her throat, and began in the nervous whisper which ever since her rise in the social scale she had assiduously cultivated as the most effectual disguise to a somewhat painfully piping tone of voice:

"I was wondering, Thomas, whether it mightn't be interesting for you to see something of those places abroad. You've never taken the time to look about you, as it were, and everything would be new and strange."

She was trembling at her own audacity, but Thomas answered quite mildly after a moment's pause:

"So it would be; and, now that I come to think of it, I've always heard that travelling is the best means of polishing oneself up."

It took a few more arguments of Dr. Hopkins, who either consciously or unconsciously had constituted himself his patient's ally, but from the moment that German baths had been placed before Mr. Brand in the light of a finishing education, their chances were almost secure. Such an opportunity of improving one's manners, well out of sight of critical neighbours, was not an idea to be lightly dismissed. Had it not been for that dread of appearing to fly, his consent would now have been given. This alone kept him for

almost another week in a state of uncertainty quite new to himself. Then followed a second and most opportune fainting-fit, which proved to be exactly the feather that was still required to decide the hovering balance.

It was in a state of armed defiance and mentally shaking his fist at the neighbourhood that Thomas Brand started on his first foreign tour.

"I'm going, but they shan't think I'm beaten," he said to his wife, even while they were on their way to the station. "The ball didn't do it; well, then, something else will. I'll do it yet. I don't know how, but there must be a way. I'll certainly do it yet."

CHAPTER III.

LA PRINCIPESSA.

DURING the first week spent at Wurmbad, Mr. Brand came nearer to enjoying himself than he had done since the days when he played at marbles in the village street, for as yet there was no denying that his playtime had been intolerably dull. Such things as *tables d'hôte* and promenade concerts and *Cursalons* were all new to him and all instructive. From an educational point of view these were infinitely superior to the copy-books.

There was one feature about the whole thing which astonished him greatly. This was the vast number of titles flying about. The bedroom alongside of his own was occupied by a baronial family; Mrs. Brand's daily predecessor in the bathroom No. 43 was a pale Polish Countess; and he himself had his place at the *table d'hôte* next to a portly Austrian Count, who was perfectly open to conversation. Almost each time that a bottle of wine or fresh rolls were called for the waiters answered with: "*Ja, Herr Graf!*" or "*Sogleich, Herr Baron!*"

It was at the end of that first week that Mr. Brand, while carefully doing up his whiskers before the glass, in expectation of the dinner-bell, exclaimed after a long silence:

"Upon my soul! There are twenty dozen of them at least."

"Twenty dozen of what?" inquired Mrs. Brand, a little startled. The exclamation sounded like the conclusion to some previous reflection.

"Of husbands for Annie."

As he turned from the looking-glass, Mrs. Brand knew by his face that his mind was at work upon some new idea. Their eyes met for a few instants, long enough to let her frightened mother's heart guess what that idea was.

"Annie is a child," she ventured.

"But she won't be so for long. How old will she be when we get her home next year?"

"Eighteen."

"And children of eighteen are marriageable. Polly, we'll come abroad next summer and bring Annie with us."

It was the sight of so many Barons' and Counts' coronets strewn broadcast around him, and apparently waiting only to be picked up, which had given birth to the idea. Having considered the question for twenty-four hours, he felt almost certain that he had discovered the remedy for the ills of his social position, that "something else" which was to do what both the purchase of Farringdon and the ball had failed to do. All at once it became clear to him what a grand opportunity there lay in his daughter's marriage. That he had not calculated upon the event long ago showed only that he lacked some qualities of a man of business.

He began to wonder whether Annie had turned out pretty. It never occurred to him to wonder whether she would turn out submissive. This he instinctively took for granted, as all men invariably do who have themselves never submitted to anything or anybody. In point of fact his daughter was almost a stranger to him. For eight years past she had never been home for more than a short holiday, and was at present having her education completed at the

most expensive finishing-school in England. Not that Thomas Brand did not care for his daughter, but so long as he was at work he would not have known what to do with her at home. From the very day of her birth she had in his eyes belonged exclusively to the holiday portion of his life—for in his mind his life had always been sharply divided into the workaday and the holiday half. In the former he had no place for her, and it was in order to make her more suitable for the latter that he had kept her at a distance and lavished money upon boarding-schools. He meant her to turn out a lady, and he knew perfectly well that she would not learn the accomplishment either from her mother or from himself. Of all the sacrifices which Mrs. Brand had made to her husband this was the only one which cut her to the quick. And yet in the thought that Annie was being taught the best manners and the best accent in England there was a soothing balsam to the mother's pride.

During the second week of his stay at Wurmbad Mr. Brand began to realise that his project might not be quite as smooth of execution as it had looked at first sight. He had heard *mésalliances* talked of, and had looked up the word in the dictionary; he had also been introduced to such expressions as "pedigrees" and "quarterings," things whose existence he had been vaguely aware of before, but which evidently played a much greater part in continental everyday life than in British.

In the beginning of the third week Mr. Brand abruptly left the place. Mrs. Brand's course of baths was not completed, but the springs at Ottobad were only a little weaker than here, and from the moment that both the portly Austrian Count and the pale Polish Countess had begun to borrow money from him his pleasure in the place became somewhat damped.

When they had been at Ottobad for a fortnight Mrs. Brand was told to pack for Hildabad, and from that time onward their summer became a series of peregrinations from one fashionable watering-place to another, Mr. Brand having decided that there could not be much difference between iron springs, and that since this excursion was meant as a course of instruction, he was losing his time by sitting still on any one spot. A positive thirst for education had come over him, causing him to pay an ever-growing attention both to his manners and to the cut of his whiskers. But through it all his new-born plan occupied his thoughts continually; it was to it before everything else that he looked for salvation now, quite undeterred by the difficulties which showed themselves on a nearer view. It was impossible to be continually staring about one open-eyed, as Thomas Brand was doing, without discovering a great many things; amongst others that foreign titles are divided into two classes, the old and the new, and that neither are to be had for the asking, the old being still far too deeply immersed in mediæval prejudice to regard even heavy money-bags as an equivalent to defective quarterings, while all the holders of the new titles are rich already, and would much rather have some moral support to their brand-new coronets than anything additional in their purse.

Nevertheless Mr. Brand remained of opinion that it could only be a question of hitting on the right man—some individual in exceptional circumstances, or who was himself an exception to his class. It became his constant occupation to look about him for that “right man,” for though there was no hurry, it would have eased his mind to have put his finger now on his prospective son-in-law, and then to have “placed him cold,” as the Germans say, against Annie’s coming home. But now the middle of

July and the sixth watering-place was reached, and the looked-for individual still remained undiscoverable.

This sixth watering-place was situated in a valley of Southern Tyrol, and had nothing German about its character, for the neighbouring Italy, overflowing its borders, penetrates here with its language, its complexion, and its vegetation, claiming comradeship with the piece of earth which has once been a part of itself. Here the women have black hair and dazzling teeth, and water is carried in copper pails balanced on the shoulders, and the sweet-bearing chestnut tree is as common as with us the beech or the willow.

Mr. Brand had come to Lancegno as he had come to the other baths, meaning to make a stay of a fortnight at most, but this time something quite different was written in the Book of Fate. On the very day of his arrival Mr. Brand had a slight adventure, destined to influence the events that were to come.

Towards four o'clock Mrs. Brand, exhausted by the night journey, lay down to rest, while her husband, who never lost any time in examining the educational possibilities of every new place he came to, started for a walk.

The adjoining village, perched precariously upon the hillside, had first to be passed through. Here, in the narrow, crooked street, the projecting roofs were not far from touching each other. Some daubs of faded colour on the walls were all that remained of old religious frescoes. The blood-red and straw-coloured carnations, whose heavy-headed blossoms straggled down from every third or fourth window, seemed to be flaunting their exuberant colours in the faces of those poor ghosts of Madonnas and Saints. At one place a couple of big houses stood back, forming an irregular square—a sort of momentary breathing space.

Half an hour ago the whole village had been sound asleep, but just now a light puff of fresh air, the forerunner of the evening breeze, came floating down the street. It seemed to be the signal waited for. From out of every doorway and from behind every corner yawning children crawled, while dark-skinned men appeared, walking as though they were drunk. In the arched passages which ran along the front of some of the larger houses, women who had been lying full length upon the brick floor stood up unexpectedly, and looked out from between the short, stumpy pillars while rubbing the last remains of the *siesta* from out of their brilliant black or languorous brown eyes.

Mr. Brand walked slowly, looking carefully from side to side. Every pot of carnations and every drowsy street urchin was conscientiously stared at in turn. Before every trace of colour on a wall he stood still and laboriously applied himself to deciphering its original meaning. All this must help in a general way to cultivate a man's mind, and Mr. Brand was determined to get the last farthing's worth of education out of his surroundings.

When he reached the irregular square he caught sight of the Austrian double-headed eagle over the door of a *Trafik*, and it occurred to him that he had no cigars in his pocket. The tobacco-shop lay within a dark, arched passage. A small, misshapen man, who looked as if he had not seen the sunshine for years, roused himself from his *siesta* to sell half-a-dozen cigars to Mr. Brand. The walls were so thick and the windows so small that the different objects in the shop could only be distinguished with difficulty; but as Mr. Brand's eyes got accustomed to the light, he could see enough to perceive that such things as sugar and letter-paper, garters and lemonade were to be purchased here, as well as tobacco. The misshapen individual was

evidently a "mixed merchant" of the most mixed description. At the last moment the Englishman's eye was caught by a box of chocolate upon the counter. Mrs. Brand was particularly fond of chocolate, and Mr. Brand happened to be in a good humour, but in the same instant that he put out his hand the shopman started from out of the dark corner into which he had already retired and swooped down upon the chocolate.

"*Per la Principessa*," he squeaked, hooking his long fingers round the box as a bird might fasten its talons around its living prey. As he busily put the packet in safety on a shelf he continued to gabble to himself, but the only word that stuck in Mr. Brand's memory was *Principessa*.

"No reason for such excitement," he reflected, as he pursued his way in some slight amazement. This southern vivacity was so new to him as to be almost disconcerting. Also he could not help wondering what sort of a thing a *Principessa* was.

A little way beyond the *Trafik* a second double-headed eagle confronted him, and he recognised the post-office. He stepped in, meaning to ask whether there were any letters. While the curly-headed young lady in charge searched a drawer, Mr. Brand looked about him as carefully as usual. Having made the round of the office, his eyes ended by alighting on some letters on the table beside him. The topmost one, in a square envelope, was addressed to "La Principessa Roccatelli."

There was one letter for Mr. Brand, a big letter with an English postmark, and over double weight. As he put out his hand for it his sleeve brushed the pile beside him, and swept part of it on to the floor. In an instant the curly-headed young lady sprang forward with the agility of a wild cat and furiously snatched the letters from off the

boards, talking Italian the while at a rate which boded no good to the clumsy Englishman.

"La Principessa," she kept reiterating despairingly, while blowing tenderly upon the square letter and carefully dusting it with her handkerchief.

"Decidedly these people have got their veins stuffed with gunpowder," was Mr. Brand's reflection on the occurrence. At the same time he made a note to look up the word "Principessa" in the dictionary as soon as he got home.

Having glanced at the letter with the English postmark and recognised Annie's handwriting, he put it in his pocket to be perused at leisure.

The open country was now reached. At Mr. Brand's feet the green valley lay luxurious with chestnut and vine, while on either side the mountain flanks stood almost bare, bristling with sharp rocks and torn by huge watercourses. He looked from the overflowing valley to the naked hills and felt well content, he knew not why. The sharp contrast excited him pleasantly.

When he had walked on for another mile or so and had seen a chestnut tree near, and had been wished "*Buona sera*" by a woman laden with copper pails, Mr. Brand began to think that this was almost as good as an Italian trip. The sun had slipped behind the hills, but this only made it all the pleasanter for walking. Just as the early twilight was beginning to fall his path led him on to a hugely broad river-track, coming down from the opposite hills at a steep incline. Nothing but two narrow green streams now wound their way between the boulders, but by its ragged shores, as well as by the sight of the scattered rocks, it was easy to guess that in the season of the melting snow the river was wont to turn into an uncontrollable torrent, preying like a wild beast upon the peaceable patches of maize and clover

which bordered it. The air was sultry, and it was terrible walking upon the ghost of a path which twisted about among the many-coloured stones. Still Mr. Brand persisted, being determined to reach the opposite side of the valley. Solitary willows and mulberry trees stood about among the boulders, living apparently upon stones alone. Some three or four goats and a few thin sheep were feeding on the scattered wisps of grass. Now and then the lad herding them would tear down the branch of a mulberry tree, and produce a low clucking sound with his tongue. The beasts came hobbling over the stones, jostling each other in their eagerness. A little further up there stood a solitary house piled up of the river stones around, and looking very much as though the water had stranded it there, together with the loose boulders and drifted trunks that lay up to its very walls. Probably the habitation of some sort of river overseer, Mr. Brand decided. At his approach a yellow cat started up from behind a yellow stone and shot towards the house. Rabbits scampered into the shelter of the open door. The sound of a baby's howls were heard within. Presently a woman appeared between the willow bushes, balancing her water-pails on her shoulders.

Mr. Brand pursued his way. By this time the main valley was already crossed, and he was following the water-course up the side valley from whence it descended. Here it was darker and closer than in the open. Soon the objects around began to lose first their colour and then their form, but Mr. Brand still pushed on. He did not think it was possible to miss the way home, since he had only got to follow the river-bed. He had left it now, and the walking was much pleasanter. The moon, too, was due by this time, but just as Mr. Brand was saying this to himself, a laurel by the roadside was vividly illuminated, and something growled

behind the mountains. Without that flash it might have passed for the rolling of loose stones.

Mr. Brand stood still at last. He had been too busy looking about him to observe the sky, but there could be no doubt now that it was time to go home. It had grown so suddenly dark that he could not see a yard in front of him, yet there was nothing for it but to face right about, and begin to the best of his ability to retrace his steps. After a time he felt stones under his feet, this must be the river-bed; but no, this could not be right, for he was walking uphill. He faced round once more, and found himself descending at a fearful angle what was evidently the bed of a torrent. Could this be the road he had come by this afternoon? He changed his direction again, and just then the first drop fell, followed by a soft patter among the leaves, and almost in the same instant by the sharp hiss of the thunder-shower upon the stones.

By this time Mr. Brand had lost all sense of direction. When he set off walking again it was almost at random. The violence of the shower was over now, and it had settled down to steady rain. The thunder was rolling away in the distance, but an occasional flash still lighted up the sky. Mr. Brand trudged doggedly along, using his soaked sun umbrella as a walking-stick. According to his calculations, he fancied that the house of the river overseer could not be very far off now, and there he would be able to take shelter.

Then suddenly, and to his astonishment, something big and white loomed through the universal blackness around. He waited for the next flash. Yes, it was a long whitish building, standing with its back to a hill, something much bigger than the river overseer's house. The Curhaus, too, was a long whitish building; had he recrossed the main valley without being aware of it? In this pitch darkness anything was possible.

Soon he had reached what seemed to be a stone wall, and having felt his way along it he came to a closed gate. It was locked as well as closed, as his first attempt assured him. He could not remember either the wall or the gate, but this scarcely surprised him, seeing that the surroundings of the Curhaus were as yet completely unfamiliar to him. What did surprise him somewhat was that a public establishment should be closed so early, for it could not possibly be more than ten o'clock. He began angrily to grope about for a bell, and having got hold of a piece of rusty wire tugged at it repeatedly. There was no result but a sound of something scraping against the stone. Mr. Brand began to beat against the heavy wooden gate, first with one fist and then with both, pausing every now and then to listen for approaching footsteps. The rainwater from off his hat-brim was pouring in miniature torrents on to his whiskers and his nose; moreover, he was beginning to feel furious with hunger. Presently he began to curse.

"One would suppose it wasn't asking over much that one of the d——d fools should be out of bed at this hour. Didn't know that keeping early hours was part of the cure. It isn't an infant's school, when all is said and done. I'll leave this confounded place to-morrow, but I swear that I'll sleep there to-night, whether or not it costs kicking their filthy gate to pieces."

And he set to work with renewed vigour. Several more minutes passed, and then, just as he paused again to listen, a key turned heavily in the lock, and something which he supposed was a face was pushed through the narrowest possible opening. A scared voice asked something in Italian, to which Mr. Brand responded by an English oath, and by placing his knee firmly against the wing of the gate which had moved. A single vigorous push was enough to conquer the feeble resistance inside, and in the next instant Mr.

Brand, having swept to one side an individual whom he could not clearly distinguish, was hurrying across an open space and towards a big building. At the head of a flight of steps a door stood ajar, and a light flickered within. Mr. Brand made straight towards it, while behind him a shriek of alarm rent the air.

The steps were slippery with the rain, and it was almost headlong that Mr. Brand entered a large stone-paved space in which one single candle burned unsteadily in the draught. From out of the black shadows in the background he seemed to hear the sound of rapidly whispered s's, but he could not distinguish the alarmed faces that were peering at him. Another door lay to the left. Mr. Brand opened it, remembering that the dining-room lay to the left of the entrance-hall, and it was to the dining-room that his instincts drew him forcibly just then. There was no light within beyond what the flickering candle sent after him through the open door. Neither was there here that long narrow table at which he had dined to-day. There was, indeed, a table, but covered with irregular heaps of books, and the wall beside him seemed to be lined with shelves on which likewise stood books. For the first time to-day Mr. Brand began to have doubts. At the further end of the huge apartment he could distinguish a curtained doorway with a thin line of light at the foot. He went towards it, while his grotesquely long shadow slipped over the flagstones before him.

When he lifted the heavy curtain he found himself standing in a second huge apartment of which three-quarters were almost bare of furniture. At the further end there shone a light. He went nearer and saw a fireplace of white marble, and of the size in which entire logs used to be burnt. In the centre of the mantelpiece stood a fantastic clock, on each side a curious urn, likewise of

white marble. Mr. Brand noticed at once that the clock was not going, and that one of the urns had lost a handle. On a small table of inlaid wood there stood a shaded lamp, beside it lay a fan, a pair of gold-rimmed eye-glasses, and a box of chocolate pastilles, while in a red brocaded armchair there sat the most beautiful old lady whom Mr. Brand had ever seen. She had been staring into the empty fireplace, but turned her head at his approach. Her features were clearly and somewhat severely cut, the eyebrows well marked, the lips a trifle compressed. The skin appeared by this light to be of a flawless white. Her hair, which was arranged in curls on both sides of her face in the way that Mr. Brand could remember that the mother of the "squire" in his native village had worn hers, was so perfectly white that, but for the eyes, it would have been hard to guess whether this woman had once been a *blonde* or a *brunette*. But the eyes were enough—keen, black eyes of that brilliant black which goes only with a southern complexion. Her gown fell in soft, grey folds to the ground. A black lace shawl was daintily draped over her head and shoulders, after the manner of a Spanish *mantilla*. Her hands, which were like two pieces of alabaster, lay idle in her lap.

Mr. Brand stood and gazed in amazement, dumfounded by what struck him as the majesty of the apparition, and the white-haired woman gazed back at him in no smaller amazement and apparently also in displeasure.

"If you please," said Mr. Brand in English, after that momentary pause, "is this the Curhaus or is it not? And if not, then where the d——l am I?"

Having said it he remembered that of course she would not understand, but the unknown old lady, stirring her beautiful long-fingered hands for the first time, calmly took her eye-glasses from the table beside her, deliberately

surveyed the dripping stranger from head to foot, and then, while a slight fold appeared between her eyebrows, replied frigidly and politely in very fair English :

“This is not the Curhaus. This is the *Monastero*, and I am the *Principessa*. Who may you be, and what do you seek here ?”

CHAPTER IV.

THE MONASTERO.

INSTEAD of having crossed the main valley, as he had believed himself to be doing, Mr. Brand had got entangled in the network of lesser valleys by which in these regions the hills are divided. It was now half-past ten at night, and much more than the whole breadth of the main valley lay between him and the Curhaus.

"How long will it take me to get back?" asked Mr. Brand desperately.

Before replying, the *Principessa* looked towards the curtained doorway, from behind which excited whispering was audible, while a scared yellow face was peering from between the curtains. A few words spoken by the *Principessa* caused the whispering to die away.

She turned again towards Mr. Brand.

"There is no necessity for you to go back to-night. No wanderer has ever yet been turned from my door, neither shall you be the first. The rain is falling fast, the road is long and dark. My roof is poor, but, such as it is, the hospitality of the house of Roccatelli is free to whoever claims it."

As she pronounced the words: "My roof is poor," her head was raised just perceptibly, and the pride in her black eyes was so fierce that Mr. Brand came near to quailing.

"Thanks awfully," he said, and then, after struggling

for about two seconds with his polite instincts, added: "Does the hospitality of the house of Roccattelli include food? I beg your pardon, but I am just wild with hunger."

The *Principessa's* features slightly relaxed.

"I have given the orders. I know that you are hungry. The way you looked at the chocolate *pastilles* was enough."

Presently the heavy curtains parted once more, and a long and lean individual, with a face like a shrivelled lemon, entered, bearing a small tray. He wore a dark green livery coat, very shiny at the elbows, and bordered with threadbare silver lace. Half a cold chicken, a couple of rolls, and a glass of wine stood upon the tray. Despite his torturing appetite, Mr. Brand hesitated to take up his fork; a feeling that was quite new to him, and that almost resembled awe, made him feel shy of eating in the presence of his hostess. Instinctively he looked towards her; with a sign she seemed to give the permission required. Then the flesh succumbed, and Mr. Brand almost threw himself on to the tray and ate like a famished wolf. The *Principessa* leant back in her chair and watched him in silence, making notes the while. As the first edge of his hunger became blunted, Mr. Brand likewise began making notes. The tray was silver, but it was badly battered. The napkin was of the finest damask, but it had two undarned holes. The blunted forks and worn-looking knives were all engraved with an elaborate coat-of-arms, now scarcely discernible. Mr. Brand's curiosity began to stir. He wished more than ever that he had put his dictionary in his pocket. Failing the dictionary, a little conversation would probably tell him more about his hostess; but in the same instant that he laid down his knife and fork she rose, and he, perforce, had to do the same. What surprised him most at this moment was her height. He had heard before of "queenly

figures," but never until to-night had he quite understood what people meant by the expression.

"You have gone a long way, you will be anxious to rest. Giacomo will show you the apartment which you can occupy. I wish you quiet slumbers."

With a majestic inclination of the head the *Principessa* turned and vanished through a further doorway, trailing her grey skirts behind her.

Mr. Brand stood and stared at the door for several seconds, then hearing a soft tread behind him he looked round and found that the yellow-faced Giacomo was already at his elbow.

Up an uncarpeted stone staircase he was led, through several empty rooms, until in the fourth room Giacomo put down the candle and said, "*Buona notte.*" Mr. Brand could hear his footsteps echoing through the high spaces and dying away in the distance. His bedroom seemed to Mr. Brand's sleepy eyes to be about the size of a cathedral. Besides a four-poster bed whose violet curtains seemed to crumble under his vigorous touch, it contained two carved wooden chairs of different designs, a table which did not match either of the chairs, and a Venetian mirror on the wall.

Mr. Brand fell asleep to the sound of the rain still beating against the window-panes, and awoke next morning to find a pattern of sunbeams upon his counterpane, fantastically ordered, just as the slits in the violet curtains had given them passage.

He lost no time in setting forth to explore. In the neighbouring rooms there was nothing to be seen except spider-webs, and now and then a piece of rolled-up carpet in a corner. Soon he stepped out on to a pillared corridor, and saw another pillared corridor straight opposite. The building formed a hollow square, round all four sides of

which the open passage ran. The enclosed space was filled with an untidy garden, just now ablaze with carnations which had long since run wild. Mr. Brand made the round of the corridor, now and then cautiously and curiously trying a door-handle. Very few of them were in working order. This and other symptoms pointed to the conclusion that only the front wing of the huge house was inhabited. There was no sound of life anywhere: evidently the household was still asleep. He descended and took a nearer look at the garden. Here it was only just possible to distinguish the walks from the flower beds. The long unkempt grass, beaten down by yesterday's rain, lay flat upon the path. The carnations looked as though they had been newly varnished. In the centre stood a stone pavilion, and not far from it, their nakedness amply draped with climbing vine, two stone figures, of which the one represented a man with clenched teeth and starting eyeballs, leaning forward in a murderous attitude and clutching something, which upon a nearer view proved to be a cast-iron rose—and a sentimental goddess simpering shyly at the dagger in her hand. Mr. Brand stood for some minutes striving mainly to discover the hidden connection between the rose and the snarl and the dagger and the smile. He could not know that Giacomo, while weeding the garden some five years ago, had exchanged the two cast-iron emblems, and that no one had thought it worth while to rectify the mistake.

Mr. Brand wandered on. The house, which was built of weather-beaten whitish-grey stone, stood enclosed on all sides by a high, fairly well-preserved wall. Except for the arms hewn over the doorway, its face was bare of all ornament, and every window barred.

When, with some difficulty, Mr. Brand had regained his room he found the same battered tray which he knew by sight standing on the table. Having drunk the very black

coffee and eaten the stale roll, he once more made his way downstairs, and after opening several wrong doors found himself in the room which he had first entered last night. Seen by daylight, it appeared to be a disused library. The walls were lined with over-laden shelves, and the old billiard-table in the middle was heaped with volumes. In the second apartment the *Principessa* was sitting in front of the empty fireplace, exactly as she had been sitting last night, and, exactly as last night, her scent-bottle and her fan lay on the table beside her and her hands rested in her lap. Every bit of furniture in the room seemed to have been dragged to this end. A fragment of a Persian carpet placed under the *Principessa's* chair was all that covered the grim, grey flagstones with which all the lower apartments were paved. On one side of the chimney-piece there hung the faded water-colour portrait of a lad of some fifteen years.

"Her dead husband," Mr. Brand decided, for he felt certain that the *Principessa* was a widow.

Beside the scent-bottle and the fan there stood a breakfast-tray. Mr. Brand flushed dark red at sight of it. The suggestion awakened by its presence here touched upon a perpetually sore point.

"Not considered good enough, I suppose, to take my food along with her," he all but said aloud.

"Good morning," he began sulkily. "I've only come to take my leave. You'll be rid of me directly."

As she turned he perceived that her face was not as purely white as the lamplight had made it appear, but tinged with the warm hue of old ivory. Mr. Brand could not at once make up his mind whether this discovery made her less beautiful or more so. Keen though her black eyes were, there yet shone in their depths some of that indescribable peacefulness which seems to be the reward of living much alone.

She wished him good morning in a smooth, cool voice, and without taking any notice of his last words. Then she added: "You will require a guide to show you the right road. I have given the orders. I believe there is a boy waiting at the gate."

Mr. Brand flushed a shade darker. "I'm going on the spot—don't be afraid. I only came in to ask whether I owe you anything. I should prefer, if you please, to pay for my supper and my bed—such as they were."

When he had said it he took fright. He could not have said it at all had he not been half choking with rage, not so much at the *Principessa's* words as at something undefinable about her manner of looking at him.

For one passing instant her eyes blazed up, but immediately her lips tightened. She paused, as though to regain her self-control, and then steadily replied:

"Both your supper and your bed were very poor ones, but even had they been the best in the land they would have cost what these cost, that is nothing. I am not accustomed to take money."

"But I am accustomed to paying my way," persisted Mr. Brand. "I have done so all my life. I have never asked for any stranger's hospitality as a present. Perhaps you think that I have not got enough money about me, but I tell you that I have plenty, and more at home."

"I know that you have got money," said the *Principessa* gently, "a great deal of money."

Mr. Brand tore open his eyes.

"Nonsense, you don't know me from Adam, so how can you know about my money? What's put the idea into your head? My get-up perhaps?" and he glanced down savagely at the wreck of his linen coat, whose creased front was mottled with water-stains, and on whose right sleeve the bramble thorns had left a wide rent.

"You have guessed rightly. It was precisely the look of your coat which made me feel certain that you must be a wealthy man. It is not hard to make one's entry when one knows that one's attire is faultless, but to come into a strange room in that coat as confidently as you did last night one would require to be either a millionaire or—let us say a Royal Highness. I do not think you are the one, therefore I conclude that you must be the other. I will not speak of your blows upon the gate; a poor man does not generally force his way into a household at night, for he is accustomed to be put down. But it was the coat which decided the question for me."

Mr. Brand listened open-mouthed, reflected for a little, and then shook his head.

"I can't quite follow you; but you seem to be a kind of fortune-teller. It's quite true that I've got a heap of money. Can you tell me anything more about myself?"

"I believe I could; but I do not wish to give offence."

"Please speak out," said Mr. Brand, in whom curiosity had now the upper hand.

"Well, then, you have acquired your money yourself."

"And how do you know that I haven't inherited it?"

The *Principessa* hesitated ever so slightly. "By the shape of your nails," she then replied, with a gleam as of mischief in the depths of her black eyes. "And by another thing as well—you kept your hat on your head when you first spoke to me last night."

Though he was holding his hat in his hand, Mr. Brand instinctively made a grab at his head. He gazed at his hostess, lost in admiration.

"You're a keen woman," he remarked at last. "There's no doubt whatever that you've got your wits about you."

Her features relaxed into a faint smile of amusement.

"May I sit down?" asked Mr. Brand, a little diffi-

dently : for now that his anger was spent, his awe of his hostess was beginning to return. "I should like to try you further. Tell me more about myself. Am I married or single? Have I got children or not?"

"You are certainly married, or you would not have asked the second question. As regards the children"—she took a careful look at his face—"I do not think that you have been worried by the screams of many babies, nor would you know how to play with them. Possibly you may have an only child."

"Right again! I've never had more than one girl. She's at school now, but I mean to get her home next year. She's rather a nice-looking lass."

"Indeed!" said the *Principessa*, with polite indifference.

"Well, I suppose I ought to be moving," said Mr. Brand, still keeping his seat. "I wonder if Polly will believe my story about having mixed up this house with the Curhaus."

"It will not greatly matter whether she believes it or not."

"Why not?"

"Because I feel quite assured that you are not afraid of your wife."

"That's true also. But, upon my word, I don't yet fairly understand how I managed to stumble in here. Except that both buildings are big, and both whitish, they are not a bit like each other, are they?"

"I cannot inform you," said the *Principessa*. "I have occasionally heard this Curhaus mentioned, but I have never set eyes upon it."

"Never set eyes? Dear me, are you a stranger here?"

"I have lived in this place for twenty-five years."

"And you have never been across the valley?"

"Let me conclude. I was about to say that for twenty-

five years I have lived in the Monastero, and that for almost twenty-one I have not put my foot outside its walls. The Curhaus was built, I think, fifteen years ago. That is the explanation of my never having seen it."

"Twenty-one years," repeated Mr. Brand. "What makes you shut yourself up so?"

The *Principessa* sat silent for a few seconds.

"I have nothing to seek outside," she said coldly. "My world is here."

Her eyes passed over the faded water-colour portrait on the wall, and returned to the fireplace.

"And did you learn to speak English here?" blurted out Mr. Brand.

The *Principessa* was still staring straight in front of her. She smiled now without changing her attitude, just as though in place of the empty grate some vision of the past had arisen.

"No, I did not learn your language here. I first learned to speak it in Paris—beautiful, wicked Paris; but in St. Petersburg also I had much practice. English happened then to be the fashion of the moment."

"You have never seen the Curhaus, and you have been to Paris and St. Petersburg?"

"I have told you already that for twenty-one years I have not been outside these walls. Twenty-one years ago the Curhaus was not built; but both Paris and St. Petersburg existed. Surely, the matter is simple."

To Mr. Brand it appeared anything but simple; but the tone of the reply left him no courage for further questions. The boy at the gate was not kept waiting much longer after this, for when presently the *Principessa* inquired gently whether the Signora Brand would not be getting anxious for his return, even Mr. Brand could not misunderstand.

He made his way home, feeling both aggrieved and interested. He had wondered whether she would give him her hand at parting, but she had made no such movement. He was quite certain that she was a grand lady, what people call "a woman of the world," though living so far from it now; but, nevertheless, when, having reached the Curhaus and looked up the required word in the dictionary, he saw it printed black upon white that "*Principessa*" was the Italian for "Princess," Mr. Brand was somewhat taken aback. He had not been quite prepared for this:

CHAPTER V.

THE CONSPIRACY.

"I HOPE to goodness, Thomas, that you will never go out walking in the dark again," was Mrs. Brand's tearful comment upon yesterday's events. "Such a turn as the whole thing has given me, and I believing all the time that you were going no farther than the post-office! You *did* go to the post-office, by the way, did you not!"

Mr. Brand first put his thumb and forefinger to his forehead and then felt all his pockets in turn.

"Yes, I did go to the post-office," he slowly remarked, "and what's more, they gave me a letter, but where the deuce——" He tried his pockets over again. "Surely I've never gone and left it in that old ruin over there! It was a big letter in Annie's handwriting and with something heavy inside."

"Her new photograph," gasped Mrs. Brand, tremulous with excitement. "*Can* you have dropped it on the road, Tom—Thomas, I mean?"

But Mr. Brand shook his head. His memory had meanwhile come to his aid, showing him quite plainly the corner of the carved shelf beneath the dim Venetian mirror, on which he had laid down the letter last night while emptying his damp pocket. Unless Giacomo had been near the spot it would still be lying there unchanged. This would entail a second walk over to the Monastery—

a huge bore of course—or was it a welcome excuse? He could not immediately make up his mind upon this point. The awe-stricken curiosity with regard to the Principessa which had taken possession of him was far from stilled, and in this way, and in spite of no word having been said about repeating his visit, he would be almost forced to see her again.

The same afternoon Mr. Brand stood again at the gate of the Monastero. There had been no difficulty about getting a guide; every lad in the village knew the way by light as well as by dark. Last night he had made an unnecessary circuit; had it not been for the detestable walking, the old palace among the hills could have been easily reached within an hour.

The gate was once more locked and barred, and though it was broad daylight, Giacomo looked almost as astonished at the visitor as he had looked last night, and followed him almost as suspiciously, as Mr. Brand mounted the broad staircase. It was still with Giacomo at his heels that he lifted the battered and blotted letter from off the carved shelf—for his memory had told him true—and once more descended to the hall.

Beside the door to the left of the entrance he stood still for a moment and appeared to be considering; then, with an access of almost jaunty courage, he opened it and walked boldly in. He felt certain that he would find the Principessa where he had left her that morning, and he was right. She sat there exactly as though she had not changed her attitude during the last six hours.

“I hope my coming isn’t unpleasant to you,” began Mr. Brand, without preliminary. “I didn’t mean to call, but I left this here behind me, so there was nothing for it but to fetch it, you see. You’ll excuse me, won’t you, if I take a look, just in order to——”

Mr. Brand, who had torn open the envelope, uttered an exclamation, and walked quickly to the window holding a cabinet photograph in his hand. The Principessa watched him without any remark.

It was the latest photograph of Annie, and it took Mr. Brand entirely by surprise. He had not seen her for a year. She had been a child then; it seemed almost as though this year had made of her a woman. The picture showed no more than head and shoulders, but even this was enough to tell that her form had rounded and her expression ripened.

Mr. Brand gazed at his daughter's face and felt strangely moved. A sudden feeling of elation had begun by taking possession of him, but immediately it gave way to doubt. He had a profound distrust of his own taste; how could he decide what claims to good looks his daughter had, since he could not even venture to choose a coat without consulting some safe adviser! No doubt it would be an immense simplification of his plans if she were to turn out fairly handsome. He felt the necessity of having the point decided for him at once.

When, after a long pause, he looked up, he discovered that the Principessa was watching him, and immediately he was visited by an idea.

"Look here," he began, a trifle diffidently, "you're what is called a woman of the world, are you not?"

"And supposing I am?"

"Supposing you are, you would oblige me greatly by taking a look at this picture of my daughter. I'm very badly in want of an opinion, and I'll go away again directly you've told me what you think of her."

The old Principessa looked at her visitor as though she were weighing the pros and cons of the matter. Finally she put out her hand for the photograph. When she had

glanced at it she began to feel about for her gold-rimmed eyeglasses. During more than a minute she contemplated the photograph in silence, while Mr. Brand anxiously watched her face.

"Your daughter?" she remarked at last, in quite a new tone of interest.

"Yes; I told you that I had a girl at school."

"So you did. But why did you not tell me that she was beautiful?"

"Because I did not know it myself. It certainly struck me that she seemed all right, but I never can trust to my own taste."

Mr. Brand had turned scarlet with excitement.

"Do you mean to say that she is actually a beauty? I half suspected it myself, but I couldn't be sure till I had asked somebody. And you've seen lots of pretty girls in your day, haven't you?"

"Yes," answered the Principessa thoughtfully. "I have seen many girls and many women, and if this picture speaks true there were few among them more beautiful than your daughter."

She was still holding the photograph in her hand and examining it with evident pleasure. The outlines of the face before her were of a most perfect and pure simplicity; instead of the fashionable touzle over the eyebrows, which the Principessa particularly detested, the shining hair was parted soberly above the white forehead. Great, serious eyes looked straight out of the picture, from under eyebrows that were scarcely curved. Despite the childish roundness of chin and cheeks, it was an earnest face, and the face of a woman already.

"Why, you spoke of her as of a mere schoolgirl," said the Principessa with more animation, "but this is something quite different."

She laid down the photograph and fell once more to contemplating the empty fireplace, with her hands in her lap. Mr. Brand had been invited to take a rest before returning to the Curhaus. Elated by the Principessa's remarks, he began to talk about Annie. She did not seem always to be listening. Now and then she took up the picture, which lay at her elbow, and looked at it attentively.

"It is a good face," she once remarked, "not only a beautiful one."

She laid down the picture and took it up again. It seemed almost as though she could not part from it. Presently she began to ask questions regarding the exact colour of the girl's hair and eyes. Mr. Brand was not quite certain, but he fancied Annie's eyes were some sort of brown—at least, they had always given him that impression.

"Brown? And her hair as well? Then she is not one of your British *blondes*?"

There was almost a tinge of disappointment in the Principessa's tone. "And her complexion—what impression did that give you?"

Mr. Brand racked his brains for a few seconds.

"Have you ever seen a shell—the sort of shells one picks up at home—the *inside* I mean, of course? Well, Annie's face has often made me think of the inside of a sea-shell."

"That would do," said the Principessa, with the photograph still in her hand. "When do you expect her?"

"Expect her! Bless me, what for? I wouldn't know what to do with her. Why, she's only seventeen."

"I was married at sixteen," remarked the Principessa gently.

"Were you really? Now, that's strange. But Annie's an English girl. Eighteen will be time enough for getting her home. I've calculated that by next year her manners

ought to be quite safe; no more danger of taking after either me or her mother. I don't mean to lose time, as it is. I've been looking out for a husband for her all summer."

"And have you found one?"

"No," said Mr. Brand, and then sank into sudden silence. He was debating within himself whether to say more or no. The Principessa's tone was now distinctly more gracious than it had been in the morning. Should he take advantage of this?

"It isn't easy to find a husband for Annie," he slowly began.

"I should have thought it was very easy."

"Not the sort of a husband I want."

And after that Mr. Brand, to his own astonishment, began unburdening his heart. He had felt the weakness coming upon him for some minutes now, and it was with a curious mixture of shame and pleasure that he yielded himself up, almost without a struggle. He knew himself well enough to understand what it was that had worked upon him. Even the folds of lace upon the Principessa's head, and even her manner of handling her fan, had helped to create that atmosphere of social refinement which to him had hitherto been unattainable, and perhaps for this reason was irresistible. Fifty trifles had conspired against the one secret weak point which for so many years he had jealously shielded from the gaze of his fellow-workers. It might be despicable, but he could not hide from himself that to lay his difficulties before a real live princess was an experience which partook almost of rapture. Simultaneously he blushed for himself and yet revelled in the sensation.

He told her of his start in life and of his social ambition, dwelling upon the account of his wealth with so obvious and childish a relish that the display was scarcely offensive.

"Not that I had any particular genius for business," he frankly explained, "but I've always had a genius for having my own way, and that answers as well in business as in anything else, I fancy."

The Principessa made no attempt to stem the current of his confidences. It seemed rather as though a discreet question dropped now and then were intended delicately to lead him on to further disclosures. She showed interest in his account of Farringdon, and inquired once or twice whether it was a mere ornamental *château*, or whether there were farms belonging to it. She also wished to know whether Mr. Brand, as a man of business, could advise her as to whether it were safer to invest money in shares or in land, and which of the two plans he himself adopted.

At this mark of confidence the last barriers of Mr. Brand's reserve gave way. Very soon the Principessa knew as much about his inner life as he himself knew. She had immediately grasped that to this man life had always been a simple, though often a tough, job; that there had been many steep hills on his road, but no tortuous ways. The opinions she uttered were sometimes unexpected. Thus, when in telling her of the ball and of his disappointed hopes, he said :

"I expected them to call in a body next day, and instead of that they went on avoiding me as carefully as though I had been a newly painted door. Where was the mistake? Was the display too great, as the *Blairnie Herald* had it?"

The Principessa replied :

"On the contrary, it was not great enough. You should have paid two hundred pounds for the music instead of one hundred, and you should have lighted up three miles of avenue instead of two. A display of money often shocks people who have not got much money themselves, but you

have only got to double it and society succumbs. Instead of being vulgar it becomes regal."

Mr. Brand kept for ever returning to the subject of his daughter's marriage. Would the husband he wanted for Annie be very hard to find? Now that the Principessa knew everything, what was her opinion on this point?

"He will be hard to find," she said thoughtfully. "If you find him at all, it will be by some chance, for it requires to be a man who is free of social prejudice—who stands either above it or below it, as you choose to put it—and such men are not frequent even nowadays."

"I mean to find him all the same; I know he's hiding somewhere."

Mr. Brand had by this time left his place, and was treading heavily up and down the stone floor, scowling at the distant corners almost as though he suspected his future son-in-law of lying low in one of these gloomy recesses.

"Pray tell me this one thing: Is your daughter to be at all consulted in this matter? Or do you intend to keep her at school until you have found the right man, and then send for her and say, 'There is your husband!'"

"That is exactly what I mean to do. You couldn't have put it clearer. And it won't be hard to do either; Annie's a good, quiet sort of girl, and quite easy to manage."

"I perceive that British liberty does not suit you—in others, Signor Brand. Your plan has much sense in it." She paused for an instant, and then added, "I also was not consulted in these matters. Perhaps you do not know that in our country it is the custom for the parents to arrange the marriages, and not the children."

"Then her parents might have done better for her than marrying her to a beggar with a big name," said Mr. Brand to himself as he looked round the grim, bare room. "I be-

lieve she's been a beauty in her day. Why, she's a beauty now!"

It seemed almost as though the Principessa had guessed the drift of his thoughts. A shade of colour mounted to her forehead as she spoke.

"You must not suppose that this apartment has always worn the face which it wears to-day. The fortunes of the house of Roccattelli have not always been such as they are now. Within these same four walls that now appear to you so naked I and my dead husband have lived in comfort, almost in luxury."

Mr. Brand had stood still, straight opposite to the water-colour portrait on the wall.

"Is that your late husband?" he asked, overmastered by a fresh spasm of curiosity.

"No," said the Principessa gently, "that is my son."

"You have got a son?"

Mr. Brand's tone expressed unbounded astonishment. Taken in the abstract there was nothing startling in the idea of the Principessa having a son; nevertheless, so complete was the impression of solitude conveyed by the woman and her surroundings, that such a possibility had never occurred to Mr. Brand. In the first instant he felt even instinctively inclined to disbelieve the statement.

"I never knew that you had a son."

The Principessa smiled a little coldly. "Yesterday at this time you did not know that I was in the world."

"And is he here?"

"My son? He is not here. He is serving in the Austrian Army. He is a lieutenant. That picture was painted when he was fifteen."

As she glanced up at her visitor their eyes met for a moment, then hers returned to the fireplace, and his to the portrait on the wall. He had not looked at it attentively

before. The lad's face was thin and eager, with a slender and singularly expressive throat, and long-cut dark eyes that might have been the eyes of a woman.

Mr. Brand resumed his walk upon the flagstones, but he moved more slowly now, and the current of his talk had suddenly run dry.

The Principessa began to make the first entirely conventional remarks which Mr. Brand had yet heard from her lips—remarks about the weather and the temperature. She also asked some questions about the Curhaus, and did not appear to notice when he forgot to answer them. The chief subject of the past conversation was not again touched upon that day.

Mr. Brand went home with the photograph in his pocket, and with a great many thoughts in his mind. During four days he spoke less than ever to his wife, and took solitary walks. On the third day he made a few inquiries of the doctor, who spoke a little English. He asked what was the reason of the Principessa's seclusion. The doctor answered with some reserve and a little *pique*. She was an invalid, he believed, but he knew nothing of the nature of her malady, seeing that he had never been called upon to treat her. A widow? Yes, she was a widow, and had an only son. Unmarried? Undoubtedly; the young Principe was not more than twenty-three, and not in a position to marry the first girl who happened to please him, owing to his want of fortune.

On the following day the Principessa, sitting in her accustomed seat, and busied with her accustomed thoughts, was roused by a heavy step crossing the library. She sat up to listen with a shade of expectation on her face. She thought to recognise the step; it was not Giacomo's. Within the same minute Mr. Brand pushed aside the heavy curtain and came towards her, with a certain something, almost

of solemnity, about his broad, carefully shaved chin. She saw at a glance that he had put on his very best clothes, and while he was still advancing she had time to reflect that he was much more objectionable in black clothes than he had been in creased linen.

Her greeting was stiff to the verge of coldness. Mr. Brand replied to it somewhat uncertainly. Up to the very threshold of the room he had held his head high, but now his heavy step faltered a little. That old woman with the silver curls and the long, white fingers was so entirely the embodiment of that social idol which he had worshipped behind closed doors since his childhood that even to step into her presence was enough to make him turn mentally giddy. At this moment it required the whole of his sturdy resolution to keep him from turning and flying.

As soon as he was seated he began talking with a sort of plunge. He started by telling her that he had come over this time purely on a matter of business. He had spent these four days in weighing the matter which he now wished to lay before her. Possibly she had already guessed his intention? Had she any objection to his going on?

The Principessa said not a single word and made no sign, and Mr. Brand proceeded, growing more fluent as he talked.

"The matter is very simple, as you will see; I fancy the less words I use about it, the better. You have got a son and I have got a daughter; your son has got a title, and my daughter has got a fortune. Your son will certainly require a fortune in order to enjoy his title comfortably, and I am determined, for purposes of my own, that my daughter shall get a title. Do you follow me? What do you think, eh? Don't you think we could come to an understanding?"

The Principessa sat so still and stared so straight in

front of her that it was hard to say whether or not she had heard a word of his address.

Mr. Brand began to grow perplexed.

"Maybe I have not been quite plain enough. What I meant to say was——"

"You have been quite plain enough," said the Princessa, opening her lips at last.

It was not because she was astonished that she had been silent so long—indeed, she had scarcely been astonished; what surprise she felt was not due to the thing itself, which for four days she had seen coming, but only to the abruptness with which it had come. The idea was good, but it required ripening, as also did her own resolution. She knew very well that the first word she uttered must necessarily colour her whole course of action for the future. It was open to her to play either the coy and uncomprehending mother or the indignant aristocrat. From under her eyelashes she watched the man she had to deal with, and decided to do neither. While he talked she was not listening, but only observing. She said to herself, "This man is honest only in the lower, rougher sense of the word, but, nevertheless, honesty will be the best policy with him." It was then that she broke silence.

"You have been quite plain enough, my friend, and it is right so. I will not affect to misunderstand you. We are both old people, and we have fought our part of life's battle, therefore we can afford to do without the flowers of speech. You wish to unite your daughter's fortune to the title of my son; the plan has much in its favour, very much indeed, but we must review the situation soberly. There may be obstacles."

"I know there may. To begin with, you may object to the connection. I don't know what your ideas on this subject are."

The Principessa smiled a little sadly.

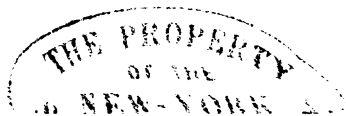
"I will tell you what they are; listen."

Though she said "listen," she sank into silence for some minutes, apparently lost in far-away thoughts. Maybe, also, this was the moment in which she struggled for the last time with her pride. Presently she roused herself and began to speak.

"It is a strange chance that has caused our paths to cross. You say that you are seeking a husband for your daughter, and I—how do you think that I have spent my hundreds of hours of solitude sitting before this grate, while the wind swept down the valley and bellowed in the chimney? I have spent them in planning how to save Luigi from undergoing what I have undergone."

After a scarcely perceptible pause she went on, speaking more quickly.

"No one can ever guess at my sufferings. You will say that you also have known poverty, but poverty was your birth-right; therefore you cannot understand what it means to be born in riches, educated for riches, to have held riches in your hand, and to be condemned to poverty. I will be open with you; the fortunes of this house had long been failing; my husband was also my cousin; I was married to him in order that my dowry should stem the current of ruin. It might have sufficed had my husband not been a gambler. He was in the Diplomatic Service, and capitals are as many spread gaming-tables to him who has the fever in his veins. When almost all was gone I persuaded him to come back here, the very last property that was still left to the family. He said the place would kill him, and I believe it did; but it saved the dry bread for Luigi, and that was all I wanted. In his last illness, whenever the shutters shook in the wind, he used to raise his head from the pillow, thinking to hear the rattle of dice; and sometimes he would start up in bed and



stretch his hand towards the window and then fall back again, groaning when he perceived that that which he had taken to be a pack of cards flying towards him was only a drift of autumn leaves against the pane. He died when Luigi was still a child, and since his funeral I have not left the house. No doubt you have wondered at my seclusion and sought for reasons. There is no other reason but poverty. I said to myself: Inside these walls I shall continue to reign sovereign, outside of them I should be a caricature. It is no one's business to remark that in my solitude I feed myself with chocolate pastilles instead of with meat, but it would be everyone's business to note that the covering of my carriage cushions is moth-eaten the moment I show myself on the high-road. So long as I remain invisible I shall be revered. The honour of the name of Roccattelli demands of me this sacrifice. I took my resolution not without a struggle, for at that time my hair was not yet white. When I came back from attending my husband's funeral, and when I heard the gate shut behind me, I told myself that for me it should not open again until it came to be my turn to be carried out in a wooden box. I gave out that my heart was broken by my husband's death and my health ruined. For more than a year past this moment had been marked by me as the most favourable for withdrawing from the world without exciting attention. That which followed showed that I was right: no one asks curious questions. Possibly I may be thought eccentric, but eccentricity is quite reconcilable with dignity. Everybody knows my name, though scarcely any have seen my person. I believe that by some I am even regarded as a fabulous personage."

The Principessa reached for her fan and began slowly to fan herself. Mr. Brand held his breath, listening for more.

"I have suffered less—far less—than I did in the world

outside. You cannot understand me. Every step in your life has been a step upwards, while I have ever moved downwards. You cannot—no, you cannot—guess at the degradation, the pain, the shame which that which people call ‘noble-born poverty’ brings with it. I have gone through it all, and I have sworn that my son shall not go through it. He must be saved, against his will, if not with it. He himself is eager to take up the battle of life, but even should he leave the battlefield triumphant he will go thence deeply wounded, horribly scarred, and how can I know whether a loving hand will then be near to tend the bleeding wounds? This hand of mine will then have long lain cold. Therefore I say he must be saved, and it must be done before I die. A wife seems the only salvation, but every rich girl would not do. To give him a worthless wife would only be another way of making him unhappy. When I beheld your daughter’s picture my heart leapt with hope, for I have learnt to read faces. You ask after my prejudices. I am not the same woman that I was when I first sat down here to puzzle out the riddle. Twenty years ago I would not have believed a messenger from Heaven who told me that I should ever speak to anyone as I am speaking to you to-day. But all that is changed. Viewed from my hermitage, the world appears so distant and so small, even its greatest figures such puppets of Fate, and even its most honoured prejudices such childish caprice. I have built a new world for myself, and in it there are no prejudices, either social or national.”

“And has your son got any prejudices?”

“My son is a Socialist.”

“A Socialist?” repeated Mr. Brand, instinctively alarmed by the sound of the word, as are all well-ordered citizens, even when they have not got a perfectly clear idea of its meaning.

The Principessa shrugged her shoulders.

"What would you have? A young man with straight limbs and a good digestion must be something. Luigi happens to have got into a socialistic current. I have no objections because I have no fears, even though it may amuse him now to have plain 'Lieutenant Roccattelli' printed upon his calling-cards. This is the general view of the case," went on the Principessa in an entirely different tone. "Now we should go to the particulars. What dowry do you intend to give your daughter, Signor Brand?"

"Two hundred thousand," said Mr. Brand, promptly.

"And how much will she inherit after your death?"

"It won't be less than three hundred thousand."

The Principessa kept her eyes fixed steadily upon the carpet, for she did not wish to betray the height of her exultation. She would have been satisfied with less—far less.

"In what is your money invested?"

Mr. Brand proceeded to give some explanations, the Principessa occasionally interrupting him with some question whose precision would not have shamed the most practical man of business. The question of the difference of religion being likewise thrown up, was dismissed as forming no serious obstacle in the case, thanks to Luigi's somewhat too advanced ideas.

"If I were entirely wise," the Principessa remarked at last, fixing her keen eyes on Mr. Brand's face, "I should first write to England for confirmation of your words, for, after all, I know nothing of you but what you have told me yourself. But I do not think that I am making a mistake. Let us look at the matter more closely still. The ages tally. One great point is to discover whether both young people are fancy free. The girl is probably safe so far. You told me, I think, that she has seen nothing of society? You

might tell me a little more about the boarding-school. Have they got masters for any of the subjects?"

"They've got a drawing-master and a dancing-master."

"Have you seen these masters? Be so kind as to describe them to me."

"The drawing-master," began Mr. Brand, in complete incomprehension, "is a German genius—at least so Miss Bellew says. She says it's a wonder he can draw so correctly with the awful squint he has. He does landscapes and——"

"That's enough," interrupted the Princess. "I do not require to know anything further about the German genius. Let us pass on to the dancing-master."

"He's the uncle of the drawing-master."

"Admirable! Miss Bellew must be a wonderfully wise woman. I think we may consider the girl safe. As for Luigi, of course I cannot entirely answer. He lives in the world and he is a man. But I require only to have him half an hour in the same room with me in order to know whether his affections are engaged. Let us take for granted that both parties in this transaction are heart-whole—it simplifies the argument. On the part of your daughter there will be national prejudices to overcome. Your nation is great, but its circle of mind is small. A man may be brave, generous, highly informed, but to you he is not a man if he holds his fork differently from the way in which you have decided that a fork should be held. In order to counteract these impressions it will require some management. It is fortunate that I have taught Luigi all the languages I know. The question now is, how exactly to put the matter in motion."

Mr. Brand could see no difficulty there. He had only got to send for his daughter and tell her what to do. Naturally the Principessa would not hear of anything so clumsy.

"I can make my daughter do what I like," said Mr. Brand, a little sulkily.

"And so can I make my son, but he must not know that he is doing it. Luigi demands delicate handling; his temper is hasty—what you English would call violent. The slightest sign of restraint suffices to make him grow restless. Two years ago I attempted to arrange a marriage for him with one of my own relations—it had always been so in our family; but Luigi, boy though he was, had already become infected with modern ideas. It was on that occasion that he declared his independence to my face, and it was that incident which made him decide upon entering the army. I could not immediately consent, but within that same year I let him go. There had arisen other reasons which made his absence from here appear desirable."

The slight fold which always marked displeasure appeared between the Principessa's eyebrows as she spoke.

"It is indispensable that this arranged marriage should wear the mask of a love-match. Send for your daughter, by all means, and I will get my son home upon some pretext which I must still invent, and after that let matters take their natural course."

When Mr. Brand still demurred, the Principessa, with wonderful patience and with an almost mathematical precision, proceeded to prove to him that her calculations could scarcely fail to come right. A young man and a young woman, of suitable ages, healthy in mind and body, both instinctively, if not consciously, on the look-out for an ideal—she could not think of anything whereto to liken Mr. Brand's doubts, if it were not a doubt, as to whether a lighted match brought close to a case full of gunpowder would cause this to explode. If the gunpowder were not damp and the match in working order they would simply have no choice.

The Principessa's concluding words were an ultimatum.

"I will undertake this matter only on condition that you leave the entire management in my hands. It will be best also if the arrangement remains between you and me. I think we understand each other."

"And my wife? I shouldn't like to keep Polly out of the secret."

"I haven't seen your wife yet," said the Principessa, doubtfully.

"I can make her hold her tongue. I am quite sure of her."

"Let it be, then," said the Principessa with reluctant consent.

When Mr. Brand was gone she almost wished that she had been firmer on this point. She could not help reflecting that in the matter of silence she had never felt sure of any woman except herself.

Mr. Brand, on the contrary, went home in a state of elation which bordered upon intoxication.

"I knew the right man must be hiding somewhere," he chuckled to himself at least twenty times within the hour.

CHAPTER VI.

A SCHOOLFELLOW.

ON a would-be rustic bench which stood at the end of an extremely well-weeded walk Annie Brand was sitting one July evening a little before sunset.

A scent of mignonette filled the air. The lawn on either side was faultlessly mown, and the pansy and lobelia beds were all correctly ticketed and as carefully tended as any in Great Britain. Had it not been for the musical sounds that came floating from the open windows, the red-brick house visible between the lilac bushes might easily have been mistaken for a well-to-do country house. But the musical sounds spoke too eloquently. No doubt the piano is played in most country houses, but no country house, however well-to-do, ever possesses three of these musical instruments—all in full cry—not to speak of the violin which from somewhere in the neighbourhood of the roof was sending its long-drawn wails into the garden below. Of the pianos, one was being clumsily belaboured with Chopin's exercises; another—so far as it was possible to distinguish the fragments—was thundering out Beethoven's "Funeral March"; while on the third a rattling waltz tune was being brilliantly executed.

Presently, with an effective crash, the waltz came to an end, and a few minutes later a tall and very slender girl appeared upon the garden path which led to the rustic bench.

Her light golden hair gleamed where the sunlight caught it, and the pink colour glowed delicately in her cheeks. She passed her handkerchief more than once across her forehead as she came leisurely along between the boxwood borders. At sight of the occupant of the bench she quickened her pace.

"Much too warm weather for playing waltzes," she remarked, as she sank down beside Annie Brand.

"That was your last lesson, Ellen, was it not?" inquired her companion.

"My last lesson, thank Heaven!"

"Why do you say, thank Heaven? Have you not been happy here?"

"Happy enough, seeing that I have always had enough to eat and to drink. I am even rather sorry to leave, because, you see, I am not quite sure what I shall have to eat and to drink at home. Uncle offered to pay for my education, but he hasn't offered to do more."

"And is that all that makes you sorry? Are you not at all sorry to say good-bye to anybody, not even to Miss Bellew?"

"Oh, bother!" laughed the other, "I'm not in a confessional. My dearest Annie, be merciful and spare me. It's too hot for your thorough way of doing things. I haven't searched the folds of my heart yet, but I fancy I shall be able to survive the farewells."

Annie said nothing more, but from the troubled gaze with which her solemn brown eyes rested upon the lobelias it was evident that she did not feel satisfied.

As she sat thus quite still, with the sunset light upon her uncovered brown hair, she was even more beautiful than she had appeared to the Principessa on the photograph, for both the transparently clear complexion and the moist red lips could only be judged of in the reality.

There is something delightfully simple about this particular style of beauty ; an artist could render its outline in a few strokes, just as no more than a few words are wanted to describe it. Beauty of this sort shows all its strength at once. It is almost as though it despised those small subterfuges, those clever tricks of toilet and manner, by means of which a lesser style of beauty seeks to enlarge its capital. It has got no reserve forces kept back to make attacks at unexpected moments ; none of those surprises in store with which a more indefinite style deals ; but neither does it require them. What it loses in piquancy it gains in delicious repose.

A long silence had fallen upon Ellen's last remark. Up there a rather lame mazurka had succeeded the brilliant waltz, for among these three pianos not one was ever silent for more than five minutes at a time. The executor of the funeral march had reached the end, and had without hesitation begun again from the beginning. Chopin's ill-treated finger exercises ran on in a sort of under-current to the other tunes, something like the chatter of a brooklet, but of one which has got an abnormal number of jumps to make and of boulders to clear. Only the violin had mercifully screamed itself into silence. Annie was puzzling out in her own mind the question of her schoolfellow's feelings. When at last she turned her head she discovered that Ellen's pale blue eyes were fixed upon her face very intently, and with an expression which was not entirely of goodwill.

"What are you thinking of?" asked Annie, reddening under the scrutiny.

"I was wondering which of us two will be married first."

"Why, you, of course, since you are going home a year sooner."

"That doesn't follow. What an innocent you are! You've got two cards to play, and I have only got one, therefore your chances are double. Besides, you're only a year younger than I am."

"What do you mean by 'cards to play'? I don't understand."

"Your money and your face—surely it's clear enough. I have only got my face, which means that I must be all the more careful in playing out my card."

In Miss Bellew's establishment Annie was known and frequently mocked at for her habit of thinking before she spoke. This time, however, she took no time for reflection, but turned straight upon Ellen with her great brown eyes full of anger.

"I do not look at those as cards to play," she retorted, in a voice which indignation had made unsteady.

"If you don't then your parents will," replied Ellen, not in the least disconcerted. "Be sure of that. Your father is a business man, is he not? No reason for looking so horrified. If you had been plain and rich the look-out would not have been so good, but with those eyes of yours there's no reason why you shouldn't get hold of your husband's heart as well as his hand; or at the very least," she added, with a fragment of a laugh, "he will have a plausible excuse for making you believe so."

Annie was silent for a minute. Then she shook her head.

"I do not believe my father could do that. It would be like treating me like a bale of goods."

"Your father would need to be a great fool if he did not know how to draw profit from such a piece of goods as your face," said Ellen, with brutal frankness.

The tone of the words was laden with spite even more than the words themselves.

For three years past Ellen had secretly hated Annie, and for the simple reason that if Annie had not been here she, Ellen Wood, would undoubtedly have been the beauty of the school. After these three years of enforced silence it was an unspeakable relief to her to be able to-day, on the eve of her return home, to taunt her rival to her face. Ellen was vain, but she was clear-sighted; she knew perfectly well that in spite of her brilliant hair and her light blue eyes, in spite of her pink-and-white skin, Annie eclipsed her at every point in the opinion of the majority. Annie herself was not nearly so certain of this, although she could not help knowing that her face was worth looking at. No moderately intelligent young woman could manage to spend three years in a finishing-school without learning to gauge with tolerable correctness her own share of good looks. The whole attitude of her surroundings, the undisguised jealousy in the eyes of her plain schoolfellows, and the grudging admiration on the faces of the pretty ones, told her far more than her looking-glass did. Besides, it would have been impossible to overlook the fact that whenever a brother or a father came to view the establishment, he was far more apt to turn his head in her direction than in the direction of Marian Burke, for instance, whose complexion was like that of an underdone pudding, and whose half-invisible eyes might have been two stray currants struggling through the dough. Perhaps even this circumstance might have escaped her attention had it not been for the hurry with which her companions were apt on such occasions to push her into the back-ground.

Her natural shrewdness told her that all this could only mean that her looks were above the average; but as yet she had been too conscientiously engaged with her studies to give full attention to the subject, or to have weighed and

measured the part which beauty plays in this world. Ellen's remarks opened a subject as yet quite strange to her.

"I would never let myself be treated in such a fashion," she now remarked, with something of Thomas Brand's doggedness upon her features. "Nothing can make me into a piece of goods."

Ellen laughed a little shrilly.

"Of course you begin by saying so. But wait a little. Don't imagine that you'll be allowed to marry whom you will. As far as that goes I'm better off than you; I shall be free to choose for myself, seeing that I can easily manage mother. But you're much too precious, of course, to be left to your own guidance."

"No, I don't believe it, I don't believe it," said Annie again. "Father could never act in that way."

She said the words firmly, and with an uncalled for emphasis, almost as though she wished entirely to convince herself by their sound. By nature she was completely unsuspicious, and she blamed herself now severely for the faint doubt which the worldly-wise Ellen's words had stirred within her.

"And besides," she added, after another moment of thought, "money alone doesn't make one precious; at least it oughtn't to."

"Of course not, but it does. Have you ever asked yourself why ten of the girls are ready to fetch your thimble or your book for you while I have got to do my messages for myself? Because of your *beaux yeux*? Not a bit of it. It's because your pocket-money is larger than theirs. Why do the servants never grumble at having to clean your boots? Why, only because they can see at a glance that your boots have cost double the price of mine. Even Miss Bellew can't help relaxing towards you. You can't really seriously suppose that you would have got the

first prize for drawing the other day if you hadn't been your father's daughter. Surely you must know that those chalk heads of yours are bristling with inaccuracies, and that both Clara Pelham and Julia Sanding have got ever so much more talent than you have."

Annie began to look troubled. "How do you mean that? Do you really think that Clara and Julia's heads were better than mine?"

"It's not I alone who thinks so. Ask any half-dozen of the other girls you like."

"Then why did Miss Bellew give me the prize?"

"Bless your heart, I've told you; because you're the daughter of a millionaire."

"If that is true," said Annie, slowly, and looking a little pale in the evening light, "then I shall give the prize back to Miss Bellew. I don't want anything that I haven't deserved. I should feel as if I had stolen it from Clara and Julia."

"You surely won't be such a fool as that. You're one of the fortunates of the earth, that's all, so why not enjoy your luck as it comes? Do you think it will be any different in the world outside? I don't. I think, on the contrary, that you will find plenty of people waiting there all ready to share your millions with you. In one way it's very good to be rich, but being poor has its advantages too. If I have got a suitor I shall at least know that he wants myself, and not my fortune."

Annie was now gazing wonderingly at her companion. She heard the words without having quite realised their meaning.

"Don't tell me more," she said, upon some impulse which she would not have known how to define. She felt half inclined to lay her hands over her ears, as though to shut out all further disclosures. "I would rather find out

for myself what the world outside is really like. I can't believe that it is so bad."

"Find out for yourself, by all means," grumbled Ellen, and then fell to mentally comparing her washed-out print dress and Annie's delicate Indian silk. How that slaty blue would have suited her own colour of hair! Was it a wonder if she hated Annie? At that moment she could not have said whether she was most jealous of the other's beauty or of her money. Annie herself seemed to divine her schoolfellow's thoughts. At the mention of the boots she had half-guiltily withdrawn her exquisite little patent-leather shoes under the hem of her dress, but the dress itself, with its perfect fit and its soft draperies, was not to be disguised by any change of attitude. There was nothing for it but to bear the weight of her companion's envious gaze. For several minutes they sat silent side by side; Ellen staring at Annie's dress, and Annie at the lobelias, while the scent of the mignonette made the air sweet almost to oppressiveness, and the lame mazurka continued to hop along side by side with the rolling chords of Beethoven's "Funeral March."

"I suppose you will spend your holidays here," remarked Ellen presently.

"I suppose so, since my parents are abroad and their plans unsettled."

"Well, for my part, I trust I sha'n't have to stop at home for an unreasonable time. Of course I'm very fond of mother, but, between ourselves, I don't know whether I shall be able to stand her accent for long. And then, the way she has of tying her bonnet-strings—it makes me blush for her in public. That's the worst of being well-educated oneself—one can't help comparing oneself with one's parents."

Annie moved a little uneasily on the bench. For years past this had been a sore subject with her, and one which

had cost her many mental struggles. She hoped Ellen would ask no questions, but Ellen's eyes were too sharp.

"You almost look as though you knew what I meant. Now, tell the truth—we're all alone, you know—have you never felt a little hot when you were out walking with your pa?"

At that moment Annie would have given a great deal to tell a lie, but it was a vain wish; she had never been able to manage the most innocent fib.

"I try not to," was all that her conscience would allow her to say, and she said it with scarlet cheeks and averted eyes.

"It is to my parents' money that I owe my education," she added, forcing herself now to look Ellen straight in the face. "Therefore it would be mean of me to feel ashamed of the way in which that money was acquired. That's how I look at the matter."

"No doubt a most praiseworthy manner of looking at it," said Ellen with a vicious laugh, "and exactly what was to be expected from the model of the school."

"I have never set up for a model, Ellen."

"No, Miss Bellew saves you that trouble. To tell you the honest truth, my dear, I'm just a little sick of having your virtues pointed out to me, and of being told how sober and sensible and wise you are in comparison to us poor sinners."

This time Annie made no answer at all; indeed, she had none to make. This was a matter which required thinking out. Was she really so sober and so sensible as Miss Bellew declared? Lately, only quite lately, she had begun to doubt whether it was so. As she looked around her now in the soft summer twilight, drinking in the scent of the mignonette and unconsciously gathering up the fragments of the musical *pot-pourri* up there, her eyes began to shine and

her young bosom to rise and fall with unspoken wishes for shapeless things which no words could have helped her to define. Sober and sensible? Her rebelliously beating heart seemed to give the words the lie. It was only that her budding youth was bursting into flower, her warm blood crying out to have its part in life; but Annie, to whom all these questions were dark, was entirely at a loss how to explain to herself the fact that such things as the reflection of the moonlight on the pond, or the trills of the nightingale among the lilac-bushes, should affect her so much more deeply than they had done only a year ago. No one had guessed at the transformation, for the more distinctly did she feel this strange new sentimentality growing within her the more careful was she to preserve her outward calmness. Even had she been able to explain what she felt it would have appeared to her as a sort of indecency to confide in even one single friend.

All at once her reflections were broken in upon by Ellen's voice.

"There is Lizzie coming along. She's looking for someone; perhaps it's one of us."

A white apron and cap were to be seen darting in and out between the lilac-bushes.

"She's in a monstrous hurry. Lizzie!" cried Ellen, in her thin, high voice. "Who do you want?"

The white-aproned servant-girl turned at the sound, and immediately set off running towards the bench.

"If you please, Miss Brand," she panted, between hurried breaths, "Miss Bellew wishes to speak to you immediately in the study."

Annie rose quickly, in some surprise. She did not know of any reason why Miss Bellew should wish to speak to her at this hour, neither did she understand why Lizzie should have had to run so fast, and yet the sense of hurry infected

her without her being aware of it. She asked no question, but she too set off running a little in front of Lizzie, while Ellen Wood, devoured by curiosity, followed at a distance.

Miss Bellew, plump, short, brisk and business-like, was sitting before a huge writing-table littered with papers. In the passage a washerwoman and a carpenter were waiting for an audience, and in the doorway Annie had run against Julia Sanding coming out with her handkerchief in her hand and scarlet eyelids. It was within the four walls of the study that Miss Bellew dispensed both praise and blame, gave her orders, and paid her bills.

"Oh! Miss Brand. Yes, immediately. Here is the telegram—no, that is Dr. White's last recipe for sunburn, and this here is the wine-merchant's bill. Where have I put it?" and Miss Bellew began groping about among the scattered sheets.

"Here it is. My dear Miss Brand, I am afraid we are going to lose you. Here is your father's message. Do not be alarmed, but I very much fear that your mother must be worse."

The colour left Annie's face as she took the crumpled paper from the head mistress's hand. With quickened breath she read the message from Lancegno:

"Send Annie immediately with a maid. No time to be lost.
THOMAS BRAND."

CHAPTER VII.

THE STIRRUP-CUP.

"Is it quite certain that our Principe has got his eight weeks in his pocket?" inquired Lieutenant Müller of his neighbour at the supper-table.

"Yes, it is quite certain," replied the adjutant. "I myself put the sand upon the colonel's signature this morning."

"Lucky man! The eight hottest weeks in the fifty-two! And what excuse has he made?"

"Something about an inheritance. His mother requires him for the business part of the matter."

"An inheritance? Surely we are not going to lose him?"

The adjutant discreetly shrugged his shoulders in order to avoid confessing that he knew nothing more.

Ever since the 162nd Regiment had marched into Bleistadt, rather more than five years ago, the unmarried officers had taken their meals in the long, narrow room in which they were now assembled. The whitewashed walls had long since grown grey with tobacco-smoke; the deal floor, in spite of having been scrubbed exactly as many times as a general had come to inspect the regiment, showed several ineradicable wine-stains; and a round black smudge in the centre of the ceiling betrayed pretty plainly that the petroleum lamp which hung there in a wire holder generally

smoked. The tablecloth was up to a certain degree protected from stains by the circular pieces of thick grey felt, upon which the beer glasses stood. Everything bore upon it the indubitable stamp of a second-rate inn in a third-rate country town. To-day the tablecloth was strewn with dead and dying midges, who had singed their wings at the lamp, for the windows stood open on to the chief square; but except for an occasional individual who passed along the pavement whistling, or for the stray bark of a dog, Bleistadt seemed to have gone to bed at 9 P.M. Even the company at the supper-table did not look entirely wide awake.

Five years of Bleistadt, however restful to the nerves, could not fail to have a sobering effect even upon the liveliest moods. As the chunks of roast veal disappeared each plate in turn found its way on to the floor, to be licked spotlessly clean by one of the hungry dogs that stood round the table in an expectant circle. The absence of other amusements at Bleistadt had greatly encouraged the keeping of these four-footed companions, and the ample leisure which had been spent upon their education had in some cases led to a quite extraordinary point of perfection. Some of the lieutenants were never to be seen in their private hours accompanied by less than four dogs, of which, as a rule, each belonged to a different race, and there were animals in the regiment calculated to make the fortune of a circus clown—such, for instance, as the major's poodle, who could beat a drum with the best of drummer-boys, or Lieutenant Roccatelli's small yellow terrier, who smoked cigarette after cigarette with inimitable *nonchalance*.

Roccatelli himself had been one of the late-comers to-night. In spite of the colonel's signature in his pocket he did not look much elated at the prospect of the eight weeks of freedom before him. His tall, lithe figure was scarcely yet filled out. The dark, clean-shaven face, with the sleek,

black hair, and the somewhat languid black eyes, belonged to a style of looks which in repose might almost be called womanish—it is a style often to be observed in Italians under twenty-five—though the most passing moment of passion was enough to show the mistake. And these moments were more frequent than was desirable. Ever since his earliest childhood Luigi's almost uncontrollable temper had been his mother's chief anxiety; to teach him self-restraint her chief care. Her personal influence had scarcely ever failed of its effect. Often and often when passion was on the point of mastering him had she opened her lips for the one word, "Luigi!" and the mere tone of that word had been enough to bring him to his senses. Like a child he would throw himself at her feet and cover her hands with penitent kisses. He himself was entirely aware of his failing, and fought against it with all his strength, but the odds were against him. The blood of a hundred ancestors who had been born to rule, and who had been used to settle their quarrels with their daggers in their hands, was in his veins, and could find no outlet in the narrow and restricted circumstances in which he had hitherto lived. He was resolved to bear his fate, and for months at a time he had borne it patiently, until there came a moment when something, anything, often an irrelevant trifle, would give his overstrained nerves the excuse they wanted for snapping, and then anger would seize him like a sort of madness. It seemed almost as though in those brief fits he felt a certain relief in letting loose all the rage which his false position had accumulated within him.

For his position was false, however savagely he might deny it to himself. Had he worn the gay cavalry uniform, as had been his wish, instead of the sober blue dress of the Austrian infantry, his position would have been false yet, for in Austria the cavalry service is *par excellence* the serv-

ice not only of the high-born, but also of the wealthy. His mother's eye had foreseen the humiliations which would be unavoidable. In an infantry regiment—she had argued to herself—his title would at least create a position for him. And so it did. In spite of his scanty pocket-money Luigi was a hero among his comrades. The regiment did not acknowledge openly that it felt honoured by having a Principe in its ranks, but tacitly everyone was agreed upon this point. The sons of small officials or of unknown country lawyers could not for the life of them help enjoying saying “Du” to the Prince Roccattelli, and being called “Du” by him in return.

Luigi writhed a good deal under it all. He suffered from an undefined desire of improving humanity, a malady very common to high-minded youth whose work in the world is not distinctly cut out for it. At present he could see salvation only in an ideal community where no one would be hampered by full-sounding titles which they were unable to support. But for this evidently the world was not ripe, and meanwhile, in spite of everything he could do, he remained “our Principe” in the regiment—more in sport than in earnest, but nevertheless “our Principe.”

“So it’s a fact, Roccattelli, that you’re about to shirk the manœuvres?” began Lieutenant Müller across the table.

Müller prided himself on being the best-informed officer in the regiment, but the result simply was that his comrades called him inquisitive.

Luigi, who had been eating his supper in complete silence, raised his head abruptly.

“No, that’s not a fact. I am going home because my mother needs me on a matter of business. I don’t want to shirk anything. I would rather she had required me after the manœuvres, but since she wants me now, I go.”

“Oh, come, Roccattelli,” put in a fat young officer, whose

father was a wealthy brewer, and who but for the circumference of his waist would most certainly have been in the cavalry, "you're not going to tell us seriously, are you, that you're sorry to miss all the heat and the dust that we'll have to swallow—and that makes one so awfully thirsty?" he added, as with a deep sigh he reached for his beer glass.

"I do mean to say it; believe it or not, as you like. I don't like dust and heat, but I can bear them as well as any man. I want to work in the world as a man works, not to be coddled like an infant. Surely that is clear enough?" and he looked round the table, as though calling on any one to doubt his words.

"Quite clear," said Lieutenant Müller a little hastily, for he was of a peaceable disposition.

The others watched their cigar-smoke and said nothing at all. They knew that Roccatelli was something of an idealist, and they had grown used to looking at his views of life leniently.

"Pepi!" added Müller quickly, as Luigi pushed back his plate and pulled out his cigarette case. "There are no matches at this end. Bring some matches to the Prince immediately."

But the unlucky youth was only making matters worse.

"I have told you a hundred times, Müller, that I am a *lieutenant*," said Luigi, bending a little across the table, and speaking not loudly, but with a very ominous emphasis upon each word. "A *lieutenant*, do you understand? The same as you are. I hate having my title jingled in my ears."

In spite of his hot temper, Luigi had never been counted among the quarrelsome members of the regiment. Rather, he seemed almost anxious to avoid the smallest chance of a provocation, for he knew very well that he could not afford

to indulge even in a harmless dispute. To-day, however, it was clear that the Principe was in a particularly irritable frame of mind. And on the eve of his return home—was it not strange? The truth, which no one but himself knew, was that he was dissatisfied with himself, and therefore necessarily dissatisfied with others. To go home to the Monastero and to “la mamma,” yes, it would have been delightful, were it not for the confession that weighed upon his mind, and which would now have to be made verbally. Everything reminded him of this approaching moment. Gyps, the small yellow terrier who was so clever at smoking cigarettes, was to-day impatiently pushed aside when he humbly asked for scraps; for even those cigarettes, though not very expensive, had, in his position, been an extravagance, as he now very well saw, and had helped to bring matters to the present pass. A hundred and fifty florins—it was not an appalling sum, in truth, but where was “la mamma” to take them from? She could not save it from her food, that much was certain; she did what was almost impossible in that way already. And at the mere thought the emotional Italian felt the tears standing in his eyes.

The grey-haired major had retired some time ago—fortunately the man required nine hours’ sleep—and both attitudes and conversation had become considerably easier. Chairs had been tilted back against the wall, and a good many elbows were to be seen upon the table. The dogs had been put through all their tricks, and were now enjoying their rewards under the table, and trying to steal those of their neighbours, as could be guessed at from the frequent muffled growls that issued from the lower regions.

“What was wrong with Bernegg this morning?” asked one of the captains of the table at large. It was the brewer’s son who replied in his comfortable sleepy voice.

“One of his fits of breathlessness came on again, poor

fellow. I always tell him that he doesn't drink enough beer."

"Are you sure it wasn't one of his *rendez-vous*?" asked the captain, cuttingly. "When I saw him leaving the parade-ground so abruptly, a natural train of thought led me to remember that blue-eyed minx at the grocer's."

But Lieutenant Böttel, staunchly defending his comrade, was quite certain that it had been a genuine fit of breathlessness, brought about by a too restricted consumption of beer. For his part he didn't believe that Bernegg was "*in einer guten Haut*" (in a good skin).

"And does Doktor Vogt's diagnosis tally with yours?" inquired the sceptical captain.

"Of course it does. At least he says that Bernegg has got too little blood, and beer makes blood, as everybody knows."

Lieutenant Müller, while listening with one ear to the dialogue beside him, could not yet succeed in detaching his attention from his comrade opposite. The snub he had received silenced him only for a few minutes, for curiosity was with him a sort of moral itch which had to be satisfied at any price.

"But the matter of business on which you are going home is not an unpleasant one, I believe," he began firmly, even though quailing a little under Luigi's gaze. "If I have heard aright, we ought to be congratulating you now."

"Upon what?" asked Luigi, curtly.

"Why, upon this new inheritance." At the word inheritance several of the chairs that had been tilted back against the wall recovered their proper position with a jerk, and the attention of the supper-table concentrated itself abruptly upon the upper end. Lieutenant Müller was not the only one who instantly foresaw that if the Principe was going to become a rich man he would cease to belong to them, and this meant a certain loss of *prestige* to the 162nd.

"Who told you that I had come into an inheritance?"

"Nobody *told* me exactly," replied Müller, on whose toes the adjutant was treading significantly under the table, "but there is a report about to that effect, that's all. Of course it may be quite false for anything I know."

"No, it is perfectly correct," said Luigi, deliberately. "We have come into an inheritance."

Several cigars went out during the short pause that followed.

"An uncle of my mother's has left her two packing-cases full of pictures, and she doesn't want to sell them before I have seen them. It's because of these pictures that I am going to Lancegno. And now you can congratulate me if you like."

"What's this about Lancegno?" asked a new voice, as the latest of all late-comers entered, accompanied by a small pack of ravenous greyhounds, who immediately disappeared under the table, where a free fight began which for several minutes absorbed the attention of the company.

"I am glad to see that you have recovered from your fit of breathlessness," began the captain, as soon as peace had been restored. Evidently his doubts were not yet quite at rest.

"Thanks. It was only an affair of five minutes. Between you and me, I believe I'm in perfect working order; but since it comes in so opportunely, I don't see why it shouldn't help me to pass the next two months in a more lively neighbourhood than this. I have asked Doktor Vogt whether he doesn't think that a change of air would do me a lot of good, and he seems to incline to the idea."

Bernegg was one of those excessively fair-haired men who always look ten years younger than they are, and who finally manage to turn grey without exciting any special attention, even among their nearest friends. He was now

close upon thirty; but in spite of being the oldest lieutenant in the regiment, he not only still bore the nickname of "the Irresistible," which he had acquired in earlier days, but also entirely lived up to it. It was said of him that in every station in which he had hitherto been quartered he had gained every female heart under thirty-five. Why it should be so was not easy to explain, for his features were nothing in particular and his height somewhat below the average. It was one of those mysteries of female preference which we so often run against in society. How he had managed to gather these laurels without ever coming into the slightest collision with *les convenances*, without so much as fighting a single duel or having his ears boxed by a single indignant papa, was a still greater mystery to his comrades, though entirely characteristic of the man. How was it, for instance, that poor Lieutenant Böttel, who had tried to steal the most innocent kiss from the baker's niece, received a severe reprimand from higher quarters, while Bernegg, whose *rendez-vous* were notorious in the regiment, was left in peace by everybody?

"It all depends upon keeping one's head," he would explain to the younger men. "When you lose your head you betray yourself, and it comes to an *esclandre*, and an *esclandre*, besides being in terribly bad style, is also unpleasant when one is not of a bloodthirsty disposition. I confess that I have got no hankering after playing the hero in times of peace."

"But how does one keep one's head?"

And then Bernegg would shrug his shoulders and contemplate his comrades pityingly from out of his self-possessed grey eyes. His eyes always remained self-possessed in spite of the liveliness of his manner and the fluency of his speech. His most fiery declaration of love had never succeeded in carrying himself away. This was the whole

secret of his art. To the eye he appeared to be a sort of human butterfly that fluttered gaily from flower to flower, and so, in fact, he was; but a butterfly that calculates its distances to a nicety and has eyes in the back of his head as well as in the front, prudently and yet fully enjoying every drop of honey that each chalice contains, while the other butterflies that would have followed blindly after him either broke their wings against each other, or else were caught in a net and put in a collection.

With all this "the Irresistible One" was far from being a heartless monster. It was only that he was too irresistible even for himself. To be so abnormally "lucky with women," and to abjure the triumphs that pursued him, would have been beyond his strength. He meant no harm, but he simply flirted as a pretty woman flirts, because "she can't help it," or because it would be too much trouble not to flirt. He did not even boast of his victories, and if he was vain of anything, it was of his French accent.

"*A propos* Roccattelli," he now began, "what was that you were saying about Lancegno? It's from there you hail, is it not? Doktor Vogt was talking about Lancegno this very morning—that is to say, it's one of the places which he suggested to me, or, more strictly speaking, I to him. But I should like a little more information first. Is it a place that people go to only to be cured, or also to have some fun? Have any of the patients—the female patients, I mean—got healthy complexions and enough 'go' left in them to kill time pleasantly? There's nothing really wrong with me, you know, except that it seems I've been scrimped with the iron in my blood, and I don't enjoy the idea of waltzing with a lot of spectres. By the bye, they do play waltz music there occasionally, I hope? Is there a decent room to dance in?"

Luigi replied, somewhat ungraciously, that there were

dances at least twice a week in the *Cursalon*, and that none of the ladies he had seen there had reminded him of spectres.

"And the inhabitants? They are your own countrymen, are they not? Olive-tinted skins and red lips, and all the rest of it—h'm, h'm—I rather like the sound of Lancegno. Roccatelli, my prophetic soul tells me that our parting is not for long. Let us empty a glass to a joyful meeting in the *Cursalon*! Ha, captain, surely you don't mean to say that you're going to bed already? Why, I've only just come. And to-day, of all days, when we ought to be giving our Principe his stirrup-cup!"

The town-bred Bernegg was the only one of the regiment who had never got broken into Bleistadt hours, and who struggled chronically though uselessly against them.

The captain sat down again with a shrug of his shoulders. For the sake of a glass of *Voslauer* he had no objection to sacrificing an hour's sleep. Luigi had slipped his hand into his pocket, and under cover of the table was hastily counting the contents. His comrades had purposely begun to talk among themselves, but though nothing distinct had been said, he knew perfectly well what was expected of him. It had ever been the regimental custom on the eve of a departure; and how many glasses had he not himself emptied at the expense of leave-taking comrades? It was of these glasses that he was thinking as, with a dark flush on his face, he counted and re-counted. The money for his railway ticket was there, but nothing beyond; the thing was impossible. It was the moment of keenest humiliation which his proud spirit had ever yet experienced. He raised his eyes and met those of Lieutenant Böttel fixed upon him with sympathising attention. The lieutenant leant across the table and said something in a robust whisper by no means inaudible to the neighbours on either side.

Böttel, who was the one Cræsus of the regiment, had for three years past been trying to lend money to Roccatelli, sums which he would most certainly never have asked for back again, so thankful was he to the Principe for being a comrade of his own. His intentions were excellent, but the move he had made was the very thing still a-wanting to fill the cup of Luigi's trials to the brim. He pushed back his chair and stood up so suddenly that all eyes were turned in surprise towards him. The dark flush on his face had faded as quickly as it had come, leaving him paler than usual, and one of the muscles of his right cheek was twitching just perceptibly.

"No," he said hoarsely, with his flaming eyes on Böttel's face, "I don't want your money. There are a dozen old Jews in the town ready to lend me money if I so choose. I have told you a hundred times that I won't take a comrade's money. Why, I don't even need the money-lenders. Pepi will bring me fifty bottles of wine if I tell him to. Why do I not tell him? Because I have sworn to take nothing more on credit. I won't be insulted by your offers."

He spoke very hurriedly, with short pauses after every few words, as though he were labouring for breath, and his fingers opened and closed rapidly with a convulsive movement that was quite unconscious.

"But I wasn't dreaming of an insult," stammered Lieutenant Böttel, who was looking half inclined to cry. The remark about the "old Jews" had gone deep home, for it was an open secret that the Böttels had only been baptised in the present generation; but the idea of quarrelling with Roccatelli on that account could not be contemplated for a moment. It was well known in the regiment that Luigi's ideas about duelling were as impracticable as all his other opinions, and that a *rencontre* with him would be no mere

dallying with fencing weapons, but more likely a matter of life and death.

"I had no idea of saying anything unpleasant; I only meant that——"

"For goodness sake, stop him, we're going to have an *esclandre!*" murmured Bernegg, with such an inimitable expression of offended propriety that for the majority of the company the tension of the situation was instantly relaxed.

Luigi had heard nothing, but still stood and looked at his comrade as though with his eyes he would nail the other to his seat. For a moment it seemed as though this innocent victim were to bear the whole weight of the pent-up bitterness within him. Then suddenly the fire went out in his eyes. He looked past Böttel and out at the open window where the outlines of the sleeping houses opposite were visible through the summer night. But he did not see them; it was the figure of "la mamma" that had risen before his mind's eye. Her voice could not reach him here, but it was not hard to recall the sound of that warning "Luigi!" which had so often pulled him back from the verge of danger.

For a few seconds he stood and struggled for self-control. No one knew what had come over him when, without a word of explanation, he snatched his cap from the wall behind him and abruptly left the room.

CHAPTER VIII.

UNCLE CARLO'S PICTURES.

THE blows of a hammer were echoing through the big rooms on the ground floor of the Monastero. It was Giacomo opening the two deal cases which had been standing since spring, apparently forgotten, in a corner of the old library.

"But tell me, *mamma carissima*," said Luigi, while working away at the hay and paper shavings within, "did not Uncle Carlo die in January? And have these four bits of canvas taken seven months to travel to us from Florence? Why, they might have been *painted* in that time!"

Late last night Luigi had arrived at the gates of the Monastero, seated in a peasant cart, which was drawn by a single mule, the only species of vehicle to which the long-neglected mountain roads—of which each in the proper season was transformed into a torrent—were accessible. The joy of the meeting was still so new that, in spite of the confession which he had resolved to make before the day was over, he could not help feeling light-hearted. For the moment the delight of the boy who is home for the holidays triumphed over everything else.

The Principessa looked doubtfully towards Giacomo. If he had not been there she would probably have explained that there had been some complications with regard to the carrying out of Uncle Carlo's testament, hence the delay in

the arrival of the pictures; but in Giacomo's presence so barefaced a lie would not be worthy the name of diplomacy, besides which the Principessa's lies were never barefaced unless circumstances pressed unusually. She therefore replied very calmly that Uncle Carlo had indeed died in January, and that the pictures had been lying here ever since March, but that she had left them packed up, being in doubt what to do with them. A Florentine dealer who had known these paintings in her uncle's house had made several offers for them. It was because she had no idea of the value of the pictures that she required her son's help in the matter.

"And what idea can I have? I am no connoisseur."

"You can take them into Terrente and have them valued, which I cannot do. Come in here and I will show you the Jew's letters; he has been leaving me no peace all summer. No, Giacomo, the Principe will not require you further."

What the Principessa said was literally true. Since spring she had received from the Florentine dealer five letters, all of which she had left unanswered. Her silence came partly from cool calculation, for in each letter the sum offered had risen by some fifty florins, and partly from a remnant of traditional pride. The four pictures were all family portraits, and she had not yet conquered the aversion she felt to the idea of seeing them thrown on to the market by the hands of Signor Daniel Silberherz. Silberherz's last letter had arrived very conveniently, just as she was looking about her for a reason which could serve as a plausible motive for Luigi's eight weeks' leave.

As Luigi glanced through the letters that had been placed in his hand his face darkened somewhat.

"But, *mamma mia*, if he has been waiting all summer, as you say, then why could he not have waited a little while

longer? His last letter is not much more urgent than the others. Since he did not get what he wanted in March, then might he not have got it in September just as well as in July? And by September the manœuvres would have been over, and no stupid jokes could be made about my having shirked my share of work. Why had it to be now?" he asked, looking into his mother's eyes with something of an imperious question in his own.

The Principessa hesitated only for an instant.

"It had not to be now, Luigi," she whispered, with a look of unspeakable tenderness. "You are right when you say that another moment would have done as well. The Jew could have waited; it was I who could wait no longer. Seven months—think of it—seven months with nothing but that washed-out picture on the wall to remind me of what I am living for. It is my treasure, my beacon-light, and yet it cannot satisfy my hunger for ever. After all, it is but a bit of paper. I should have waited till September, it is true. I wanted to wait, but I grew weak, I confess it, my son. Can you forgive me?"

She was not speaking on impulse, though her heart was in every word she said. Having taken a quick review of the situation, she had decided that she could afford to be frank to this extent, that it was even safer than absolute denial.

As Luigi looked at her the ill-humour was still discernible about his lips, but already his eyes were melting.

"And in order to get me home you used the excuse of the pictures? O, *mamma mia, mamma mia*, you are too clever for me, far too clever; I always said so; I cannot fight against your *sagacità*! Am I really to forgive you?"

His arms were about her now, as she sat upon her accustomed seat before the fireplace, and he knelt on the piece of carpet at her feet. He did not say that he forgave her;

but he stroked her white hands softly, and for several minutes these two revelled in silence in the joy of each other's presence.

Then suddenly there came to him the remembrance of the confession he had to make. It was like a dark cloud across the sunlight. He resolved at once not to rise from his knees until he had told her everything. He stopped caressing the white hands and considered for a moment. Then he closed his eyes, so as not to see her face.

"*Madre*," he began very low, "it is I who ought to be asking for forgiveness, instead of granting it. I have something I must tell you, now—immediately. Do not let me go until I have told you all."

"Speak, my son."

No one could have guessed from the tone of her voice that a sudden shiver of fear had passed over the Principessa. Her heart was beating stormily in expectation of her son's next words. Upon what these words were depended whether the edifice of his future happiness which she had built up in her mind was to crumble instantly to the ground.

Luigi began to talk low and rapidly, sometimes keeping his eyes closed and sometimes fixing them on one of the worn buttons of her bodice. He told her of the extravagances he had committed—such extravagances as the cigarettes which Gyps had smoked, or an occasional bottle of *Vöslauer* at the supper-table; he called himself a sinner, not for effect, but because under the eyes of his ill-fed and white-haired mother he actually felt that even the blackest sinner on earth was no more than his fellow-criminal. Finally, he told her in so many plain words that he owed a hundred and fifty florins to a money-lender at Bleistadt, and that he must either pay it before August 31 or leave the army. When he had said everything he laid his head upon his mother's lap and buried his face in the folds of her

dress, as he had so often done in his early childhood. And then he held his breath, and waited for what she would say. At the bottom of his heart he was praying that she should reproach him. The bitterer the reproaches the less difficult would it be to forgive himself.

For a long time she said nothing at all. It was after a pause that seemed to Luigi endless that she asked :

“Is that all you have got to tell me, Luigi?”

The tone of the question and the question itself were so different from what he had expected that he looked up straight into her face, and there, in place of the reproach—or, at least, the sorrow and perplexity which he had felt certain of finding—he met a look of such tender and triumphant pride that he was utterly at a loss how to explain it to himself.

“*Mamma mia*, what do you mean? Is it not so very bad, then?”

The amazement on his face brought the Principessa back to her senses. In an instant she remembered her *rôle* and would have taken it up again, but at that moment she could not get the mask to fit. The reaction of relief was too great to be entirely suppressed. She had feared to hear such different words—words that would have been deadly to her hopes—for, after all, he was but twenty-three, and everywhere in the world there are seductive women. Innocent boy! And it was this that had weighed on his mind! A hundred and fifty florins—and Annie Brand’s dowry would be two hundred thousand pounds. The Principessa had to take her under lip between her teeth for fear of laughing out loud in his face.

“Is it not so very bad, then?”

Of course, she ought to have said that it was very bad; that she could not imagine where the money was to come from; but the strength failed her to bring back to the face

before her the cloud that had barely vanished. Diplomacy spoke, but so did tenderness. She opened her lips to pronounce reproaches, and before she had made up her mind what to say she perceived to her astonishment that she was soothing him with vague assurances, quite unlike her usual precise mode of argument.

Luigi listened in a mixture of relief and surprise. Their pecuniary situation was not quite so desperate as he supposed; there were different ways by which a hundred and fifty florins could be raised before the end of August. He did not in the least understand how this could be, and yet merely to hear the words was a lifting of the load. While he listened an idea came into his mind.

"The pictures, *madre!* It is more than a hundred and fifty florins that Daniel Silberherz offers you for them. We will sell the pictures, and neither I nor Gyps will ever again smoke a cigarette, and all will be well."

"I hope, on the contrary, that both you and Gyps will smoke a great many more cigarettes," she answered in a tone of light-heartedness which he had never before heard in her. "And as for the pictures, we will consider the matter; there is no such hurry, and meanwhile we may have some other idea."

Luigi was on the point of answering, when quite unexpectedly the curtained doorway was filled by a broad figure, and from the other end of the room Mr. Brand announced in a stentorian voice:

"She is come!"

In the ardour of talk the steps crossing the library had been unnoticed.

Luigi rose from his knees hastily and in some confusion. The Principessa's expression was completely changed. A fold had become visible between her eyebrows as with her white fingers she smoothed her skirt, at the same time

keeping her visitor well in her eye. Luigi likewise was staring at him without attempting to disguise his astonishment. He waited only until a brief introduction had taken place in order to disappear.

"So that is the Prince?" said Mr. Brand, before the door was well closed, and in a tone that almost betrayed disappointment. The lieutenant in the sober blue uniform did not look to him so very different from other lieutenants in blue uniforms whom he had come across this summer.

The Principessa looked at him with wrathful black eyes.

"If you begin like this," she said, barely suppressing her anger, "we may throw up our game on the first day. What evil spirit told you to stumble in here with that announcement on your tongue? What am I to say if Luigi asks me who is come? Everything may be ruined by one such move as this. I have told you already that you are nothing but a chance acquaintance whom the bad weather blew in at my door one night—do you understand?"

"I understand," said Mr. Brand, a little crestfallen. And then he added in the same breath: "Have you had that talk with your son? Is he safe so far?"

The Principessa's expression cleared on the instant.

"He is quite safe, thank Heaven!" she replied almost gaily. "My mind is entirely at rest, for Luigi is only in love with five women."

"Five women!" repeated Mr. Brand, turning a little pale.

The horror in his face tickled the Principessa's fancy so much that she actually began to laugh.

"You men think yourselves great reasoners, don't you? And yet what clumsy brains you all have got! The only thing to be afraid of was Luigi being in love with one

woman. Don't you understand that safety lies in numbers? It is impossible to love five women deeply, therefore it logically follows that he loves them all on the surface. That these blue-eyed and brown-eyed sellers of cigars and washer-women's daughters should catch his fancy lies in the nature of things. Italians are not Englishmen. In our country it is not only the vine and the pomegranate that ripen early. An Italian who at twenty-three still sits and waits for his first love would be a monster of his kind. But do not be afraid. All this is mere child's play. He believes that he loves. I know better. I know that up to to-day I, his mother, am his only real love. He does not know what lies in himself, for the depths of his nature have never yet been touched. But we must not lose our time," went on the Principessa more briskly. "*Dio mio*, what a fright you gave me! You must stop running over here with every atom of news, but since you are here now we must make use of the minutes. You say she has come?"

"Not actually arrived, but I have had a telegram from Terrente. She will be here to-day. Shall I bring her over to-morrow?"

The Principessa raised her hands and let them fall again with a gesture expressive of despair.

"You men are entirely hopeless. The idea of my seeing her before Luigi does! It would be clumsy to the point of madness. There are many ways of arranging their first meeting; let me consider which is the best. To see each other twice, three times, without speaking, would probably be the safest—such meetings awaken curiosity and heighten desire—but we have got no time for experiments. Within the eight weeks of Luigi's leave everything must be ended. Let me consider. It must be an accidental meeting, of course, and the surroundings must be carefully selected, for in such first meetings they never fail to

play a great part. Do you know the river inspector's house? The one that stands in the river bed about half-way across the valley? A dozen yards from that house there used to stand the little old chapel of Saint Sebastian. Deep among the stones, and all around it, there grew tall, pink flowers as high as my knee—from afar they seemed to be a cloud of rose-colour that floated over the ground. This is how it was twenty-one years ago; doubtless much has altered since, but if the chapel has not been washed away, and if those flowers still bloom on the spot, I think that would be a good place for Luigi to set eyes upon Annie."

The Principessa said *Annee* rather than *Annie*, though she was endeavouring to give the right accent.

"It is July now; yes, the flowers ought to be in bloom. Let her rest completely to-day and most of to-morrow, for it is necessary that she should look her very best. To-morrow, between five and six o'clock, take her to the place. She has never seen exactly this sort of pink flower before, and if she is a girl like other girls she will want to gather them. In the worst case you must tell her to gather them—for her mother, for anybody—and while she is standing knee-deep in the pink cloud, Luigi will pass by. If her hair had only been golden I should have felt quite certain of the effect, for Luigi himself is black, as you have seen, and it is generally the contrast that attracts. It would be good if she had a white dress on, or, at the very least, a light-coloured one. What a misfortune that I cannot have the dressing of her!" And the Principessa's fingers moved in her lap instinctively, as though with delicate touches she were here adjusting a ribbon, and there plucking out a flounce.

"How do you know that he will pass by just then?" stolidly inquired Mr. Brand.

She looked at him with a smile of supreme pity.

"Because I shall make him pass by. It is a piece of good fortune that the inspector's baby should happen to have fallen sick just now. The woman has been here begging for a remedy. Those people come to me rather than to the chemist, for many believe that I deal in witchcraft. To-morrow, towards six o'clock, I shall send Luigi there with some *tisane*. The rest is quite easy. Luigi has been introduced to you. If he speaks to you it will be well; if he does not speak it will be almost better. That first glimpse should not be much more than a vision. After that, if I am not mistaken, Luigi will tell me that he wishes to spend an evening in the Cursalon in order to view the guests of this season. He has spent many evenings there in former years—more than I should have wished," added the Principessa, with a sudden cloud of displeasure upon her face, as though at some unwelcome recollection.

Mr. Brand sat with his elbow on his knee, twisting an end of his whisker round a finger.

"Annie is not the only pretty girl in the Cursalon," he remarked; "is that plan quite safe?"

"Quite. I never shoot in the dark, my friend. I have collected information, and I know that at this moment there are no dangerous rivals for your daughter at Lancegno, and no man with whom my son will compare unfavourably. This second meeting will set the ball rolling, I believe, and then we must watch and wait. Do not come here again until I send you word."

Mr. Brand was already at the door when the Principessa called him back again.

"When you do come again, be sure that you bring me an exact list of the new arrivals. You can copy it from the *Curliste*."

"Won't it do if I learn them by heart?"

"No; I require to have them written out. I have a

reason. Perhaps some day I may tell it to you. And another thing, it will be better if you do not talk too much of your money. Nobody knows you here, and there is no reason why anybody should know how large your fortune is. Unmasked bags of gold might frighten off Luigi. Remember this, and give your wife the necessary instructions."

When Luigi came downstairs again he found his mother alone.

"So you have begun to see visitors again, *mamma mia*; you never told me this in your letters."

"I have no visitors, my son, except when occasionally the Padre Giulio comes to exhort me."

"And that man who was here just now?"

"Oh! that one? He is a rather eccentric Englishman who missed his way one night in the hills, and almost battered down the gate in search of shelter. Giacomo will tell you what a fright he got. He comes here at intervals to thank me for my hospitality, and I have let him have his will."

"But he isn't a gentleman, mamma," said the red-hot Socialist with an expression of disapproval.

"No; but he is an original. I have seen so many gentlemen in my day that I can almost always guess what each one is going to say next, but Mr. Brand is full of surprises. There is something of a baby and something of a brute about him, and the combination happens to tickle my fancy. He is a creature not to be driven with clubs, and yet to be guided with a little finger, so long as that little finger is placed upon the right spot. Have you told Giacomo to carry the hay out of the library?"

While the Principessa was answering her son's questions, Mr. Brand, panting under the midday sun, had barely regained the shelter of the Curhaus. A fly, white with dust, *was standing* at the door, while a well-dressed, elderly

woman was superintending the removal of some evidently brand-new travelling trunks. From the dining-room to the left a murmur of voices was heard, for it was the luncheon hour, but Mr. Brand cast a look at his hands, and turned to the staircase. Since his acquaintance with the Principessa he had become much more particular about such things. Neither on the staircase nor in the passage above did he meet anybody, but the door of the private sitting-room was standing ajar, and in the middle of the floor, with her veil still down and her umbrella in her hand, there stood a young woman, whom he did not think he had ever seen before.

She came quickly towards him and took hold of his arm.

"Where is mother?" asked a familiar voice, hoarse with the dust of the journey and tremulous with ill-suppressed excitement. "Father, tell me quickly, where is mother? Have I come in time?"

CHAPTER IX.

"IL BAMBINO."

PUNCTUALLY at five o'clock on the following day Mr. Brand ordered his daughter to get ready for a walk. Annie, in whom the mechanical schoolroom obedience was still deeply rooted, rose without a word of protest, though she would in reality much rather have continued to sit quietly by her mother's side. She was still suffering from the reaction brought about by her unexpected reception yesterday. For three days she had lived in a continual strain of anxiety. With closed eyes she had drawn to herself picture after picture of her mother's sick-bed—perhaps her death-bed. In every throb of the engines which had borne her across Europe she had seemed to hear the chords of Beethoven's "Funeral March," and at every shriek of the engine she had started up, as though at the note of a bird of ill omen.

And now, at the end of it all, there had been nothing but her father's astonished face and a burst of robust laughter where she had been steeling herself for paroxysms of grief. Twenty-four hours had not been enough to recover from the surprise, almost the consternation, of the discovery. The explanations she had received were lame and not quite intelligible. Mrs. Brand had at first not attempted to explain anything, but had wept copiously, *according* to her invariable habit in moments of emotion.

Later on she had stammered something about Miss Bellow's last report having been so wonderfully favourable, and that since Annie had studied so well she was probably "finished" already and had no more need to stay at school, and would most likely enjoy a little gaiety, and as there seemed to be such good opportunities here, &c. But she looked at her daughter guiltily as she spoke, for she had received her orders.

Even now it was not clear to Annie why she should have been telegraphed for, but to find that the throbbing engines and the shrieking whistles had lied was happiness enough for the present, and she pursued the question no further.

When she stood before her father, drawing on her gloves, he contemplated her doubtfully.

"That's your travelling dress, isn't it?" he inquired a trifle shyly, for he had not yet got quite used to believing that this marvellous young woman was actually his daughter. "Haven't you got anything else to wear?"

"Oh, yes," said Annie, looking up in surprise, for she had never yet heard her father make any remark about her clothes. "But they are not all unpacked yet."

"Then tell your maid to unpack them. You can't go in this; it's much too hot. Haven't you got a white frock?"

"It would have to be ironed."

"Then put on a green or yellow, or anything you like, so long as it's light-coloured. Do you hear? It must be something light-coloured."

Annie went, in growing amazement, and for five minutes Mr. Brand paced the corridor, muttering to himself that it was all rubbish, utter rubbish, but at the same time feeling rather pleased with his first attempt at diplomacy.

Presently Annie reappeared in a slaty-blue Indian silk, and with a wide straw hat upon her head, which left her

forehead and eyes in shadow. Mr. Brand looked at her in undisguised astonishment. Since she had left him five minutes ago she seemed to have grown more beautiful by another degree.

"Which way are we going?" asked Annie, standing still outside the gate. "Up that valley?"

"This way," said Mr. Brand, promptly. A minute later he added upon reflection: "This is my favourite walk."

They had been walking for about twenty minutes, when Annie remarked:

"Your favourite walk isn't very good walking, father. Are all the roads about here as bad as this?"

"I wish you would try and remember to call me 'papa,' Annie; all the better class of people use the word."

They were now laboriously threading their way between the shining, many-tinted stones of the river bed. To the right and to the left the narrow water-streams bubbled and gurgled in a tremendous hurry, only very rarely finding time to form a pool as smooth and intense in colour as a polished green stone.

"Are we going much further?" asked Annie, in a tone of resignation.

"Only as far as that house you see ahead."

"Is there anything particular to see about the house?"

"Yes. That is to say, there's a chapel close by which is quite worth looking at."

"But why must I look at it to-day?" was Annie's instinctive thought, though she made no further remark.

About a stone's throw from the solitary house and in the very middle of the river bed there stood something which at a little distance looked not unlike a dog kennel, but which, on nearer view, showed itself to be the upper half of a small wayside chapel, which had probably been built at a time when the river took a different course. The heads of

two solid stone pillars and the top of a stone arch with a fragment of fine carving were still visible. All the rest was buried in the gravel and stones which the river had gradually heaped up all around, and which in time would, no doubt, transform Saint Sebastian's sturdy little chapel into a shapeless mound. Of Saint Sebastian himself, painted in *fresco*, only the head and shoulders and the shafts of the two topmost arrows which had pierced him were still visible.

It was only when Mr. Brand stood still at last that Annie found leisure to look about her, and the first thing she perceived was that she was standing in what appeared to be a pool of rippling rose-coloured waves, which broke gently upon either shore. In its whole breadth the river bed was at this spot flushed pink by tall, waving flowers.

"Oh, father, how beautiful!" was all that Annie said, and without giving a look to Saint Sebastian, she set about gathering all she could reach. It was only when both her hands were well-nigh full that she remembered to grow uneasy at the thought of not knowing what these flowers were called. So long as she had been in Miss Bellew's establishment she had never gathered a flower without being able to range it correctly in its class and order, and the atmosphere of Miss Bellew's establishment had not yet begun to disperse. These unknown blossoms had some of the attributes of a carnation, and yet they were not carnations. Finally, she made up her mind to send a dried specimen to Miss Bellew, and after that she went on gathering with a clear conscience.

Mr. Brand, meanwhile, was tramping about uneasily among the boulders, every now and then standing still and shading his eyes towards the opposite side of the valley. Occasionally, too, he muttered something below his breath, which Annie could not hear, but which was only the word

"rubbish," repeated in different tones of disapproval. He had not got over the belief that all this plotting and planning was a piece of tomfoolery, and that his own system would have been far the simplest in the end.

"Are you waiting for anybody?" Annie asked him once.

"Nonsense! What put that idea into your head? I was looking at those rocks."

A minute later he remarked: "I think I'll just take a turn up in that direction, while you go on gathering your flowers."

"But I have got enough flowers now, father; I can go with you."

"No, you can't," said Mr. Brand in a kind of terror, for he remembered the very letter of his instructions, and his awe of the Principessa never quite left him even outside of her presence. "You haven't got near enough yet. Your mother—your mamma, I mean—will be needing some. I'll just look a bit ahead, and you stop here, and mind you go on gathering."

He turned up the river bed, and Annie went on gathering, but a little languidly now. When her hands could actually hold no more, she thought it could scarcely be disobedience to rest a little. Close beside her there lay the trunk of a large willow, left there by the water, whose dead, black roots stood out from between the stones like gigantic claws. It was of the right height for a seat, and Annie became aware that she was tired. She sat down with a wonderful speckled stone for a footstool and her lap full of flowers. Now only she perceived that her gloves were spoilt, and experienced a pang at the thought of what Miss Bellew, who was so particular about orderly habits, would have said. She pulled them off carefully before making up her flowers into a big bunch. It was only when the bunch was securely tied with a grass blade that she leant

back against the branch behind her, and allowed herself the luxury of doing nothing.

This was the moment at which the fairy prince ought to have passed by. Not even the Principessa herself, had she been here, could have improved anything either upon the *pose* or the *mise en scène*.

But the fairy prince did not come. Her father had disappeared among the boulders, and nobody at all was visible either up or down the river bed. The solitary house close by did not appear to be any more alive than the trunks around it. It looked like a natural product grown up out of the river bed. Annie recognised the pearly-white, the chocolate-brown, the sulphur-coloured stones which she had already noted on her path this afternoon. They shone across to her like a sort of rough mosaic. While she was gazing at them the house unexpectedly gave a sign of life. It was only the thin whine of a very young baby that came floating out through an empty window-socket.

On each side of Annie the two clear, green streams were chattering busily. In their intermittent gurgling and unaccountable leaps they reminded her somewhat of Chopin's exercises as she had heard them executed on her last evening at Miss Bellew's establishment. Chopin's exercises and Beethoven's march, and the telegram and the scept of mignonette, and Ellen's strange words and the hurried journey—it was all still somewhat mixed up in her mind. These last days had been so breathless that she had not even attempted to disentangle her impressions. This was the first entirely quiet moment. She would make use of it in trying to order her thoughts as she had been taught to do, and as it also lay in her nature to love doing. To begin with Ellen, what was it she had said? And again she passed the words in review, and again rejected them with all the indignation of a nature which not only has no evil

in it, but is loth to believe in the existence of evil. If somewhere at the bottom of her loyal heart a faint uneasiness had remained like a taint upon her perfect faith she was not aware of it herself.

Having settled the question of Ellen's views, she would have passed on to analysing the reasons which had put her into such a groundless fright about her mother, but her thoughts were beginning to wander. That thin wail that came from the open window over there, in one long and seemingly unbroken note, left her no peace. Try as she would, she could not get her mind fixed on the subject, and when once it had occurred to her that possibly the mother was out at work and the little thing alone, she felt that her reflections were at an end for that day. She had heard stories of babies strangling themselves with the strings of their caps or suffocating under their pillows. She would look in at the open window to see if anyone was there.

She looked in by several empty window sockets, and at last, in the only room that appeared inhabited, caught sight of a wooden cradle rocking uneasily on the floor, while a tiny brick-coloured leg waved over the edge with a gesture verging on desperation.

"He will probably tumble out. Let me see; yes, I think it is my duty to go in and examine the matter."

Possibly it was her duty, but there is no doubt that it also was her pleasure, for Annie belonged to the class of women whose motherly instinct is not latent, but ever present. She made her way round to the back of the house. Here half a dozen pumpkins and a few thin apple trees, bare of fruit, the survivors of a drowned orchard, were all the signs of cultivation. The open door was chokefull of rabbits, which fled at her approach. In the narrow room within, the piercing wails resounded against the walls. A

broken bedstead stood in a corner, a man's coat hung on the wall, and a woman's apron lay on the floor. Upon the unpainted deal table there stood an earthenware dish half-full of cold polenta, on which the flies were feasting. Probably, too, it was the flies that had brought the occupant of the cradle to this point of unmanageable despair.

Having laid down her big bunch of flowers beside the polenta, Annie somewhat timidly approached the cradle, and with her inexperienced hands would have released the small struggling mass from the highly inconvenient position into which it had wriggled itself, but the mere touch of her hand let loose a fresh volley of howls. She would not desist, for the unfortunate infant's head had got smothered in a linen cloth—at least, so it seemed to her, though in the present state of things she could not be quite sure which was the head and which the feet, and whether all the legs and arms were there which are wanted to make a baby complete. She made a gallant effort, and lifted the whole living clump bodily out of the cradle. But this only seemed to make matters worse. There was no doubt now about the baby having its full complement of legs, for she was being vigorously kicked by both; but wasn't the head on the point of dropping off backwards? And which was the right way to take hold of him? The baby was no longer howling, but roaring in a manner that appeared entirely unapproachable to consolation. Annie began to wish that she had left him in the cradle, and while she stood there struggling with the scarlet imp, herself scarlet with excitement and alarm, and murmuring unheeded words of comfort, the door was pushed open, and a tall young man in a blue uniform entered rapidly and then stood still in amazement. The apron upon the floor began to flap in the sudden draught, and the flies buzzed up from the cold polenta. There could be no doubt that the surroundings were not

nearly so poetical as those which the Principessa had had in her mind's eye.

Annie glanced at the stranger, and it flashed through her mind that she had never before seen anyone quite so dark, but she had no time even to wonder who it was. The terrible infant seemed to be slipping through her fingers like an eel; in the next moment it would probably have reached the floor had not the stranger stepped quickly forward.

"Let me help you," he said in Italian. "You cannot manage that alone. Give me the *bambino*."

She understood the intention, though not the words, and without more ado he took the baby from her, handling it with much more confidence than she had done, though obviously with just as inexperienced fingers. He went on talking in Italian, not to Annie, but to the baby, whom he was attempting to rock in his arms. By degrees the howls lessened and almost ceased. Annie looked on in surprise. She had never before seen a man, certainly not so young a man, rocking a baby in his arms and crooning to it like an old nurse. In theory she would have found it ridiculous, and yet in reality she did not feel in the least inclined to laugh. Probably this man had never before held a baby, but the true southerner has in him a certain easy adaptiveness to the circumstances of the moment, as well as an utter absence of self-consciousness, which enable him to feel at ease in situations in which the wisest of true northerners cannot help looking a little like a fool. When Annie had stood watching for about a minute it seemed to her the most natural thing in the world that an officer in uniform should be trying to put an infant to sleep, and should apparently be succeeding too.

"Do you think he will stay quiet now?" she asked anxiously and in a whisper.

The young man looked up at her quickly, and answered, likewise in a whisper :

" Pardon me, I did not know you were English. Yes, I think he will stay quiet. If you would have the grace to put the pillow back in its place I think I can lay the *bambino* in the cradle. His mother must be coming at once."

" Is it right so ?" asked Annie.

" Yes, I think that is the way they do it."

When with skilful brown fingers he had deposited the baby, he raised his eyes once more to Annie's face, and she read there a sort of wonder which she did not understand.

" I should have introduced myself," he said, still whispering, for fear of undoing what had just been accomplished ; " I am Lieutenant Roccatelli."

Annie was on the point of saying that her name was Brand when the rabbits were heard to scamper apart, and a tall, hard-featured woman with a white handkerchief bound about her head entered the room.

" *Madre di Dio, il Principe !*" she said just above her breath, and made a rush at the lieutenant's hand, which she was evidently bent upon kissing. Under cover of this greeting Annie took her bunch of flowers from the table and slipped out of the room and the house. Almost immediately she found herself face to face with her father.

" Where on earth have you been hiding yourself ?" he growled, obviously in one of his worst humours.

Annie explained, somewhat shamefacedly, but Mr. Brand would not listen.

" Well, come along," he interrupted ; " I've had enough of this nonsense for to-day. It isn't *my* fault if things don't fit, anyway."

Annie followed in crestfallen silence. She could only suppose that it was the dinner hour that did not fit. Presently she ventured to observe :

"I really think if I hadn't gone in a misfortune would have happened, father—papa. It nearly happened, as it was, only that the lieutenant arrived in time."

Mr. Brand stood still suddenly.

"Which lieutenant?" he asked.

"I can't tell you his name, it was something Italian, but he spoke English."

"And he came into the house and talked to you?"

"Yes."

"What did he talk about?"

"About the baby, of course; there wasn't time for anything else."

"Was he tall and black-haired?"

"Yes, his hair was certainly very black, and his eyes too, I think."

"Humph!" said Mr. Brand, and cast a look over his shoulder at the house, almost as though he were thinking of retracing his steps. Finally he continued his way, though at a rather less furious pace.

"He must have come by another road," he growled to himself. "Well, I've done my best. The Principessa's a keen woman, but she didn't take the baby into her calculations."

Meanwhile Luigi, having handed over the *tisane* together with his mother's instructions, came out of the house again, cast a glance up the river bed, and then turned thoughtfully homewards. Upon the prostrate trunk of the old willow there lay some scattered pink flower heads. He stopped and looked at them, still with a sort of wonder in his eyes.

After all, it had not been much more than a vision.

CHAPTER X.

“ VOI CHE SAPETE——”

AMONG the instructions which Miss Bellew had found time to give Annie before her hurried departure from Cumberley, that of practising her songs carefully had been one of the foremost. A whole year of singing lessons must on no account be wasted. Accordingly, on the morrow of her first walk at Lancegno, Annie took her music portfolio under her arm and made her way downstairs, for she had discovered that there was a piano in the big Cursalon below. She was already dressed for the seven o'clock *table d'hôte* dinner, but most of the other guests were still at their toilet, and it had occurred to her that this would be a nice quiet time for going over her songs.

The Cursalon was quite empty, for the evening was exquisite. Outside, under the arcades, smartly dressed children were playing about under the supervision of their nurses.

Annie sat down at the big pianoforte which stood at the far end of the room, so as to be well out of the way of the dancers. The apartment had all the attributes of a ball-room—size, height, the velvet-covered seats running round the four walls, the polished floor, and the balcony above for spectators.

When she had struck a chord and tried a note, Annie broke off in alarm. She was not shy about her singing—

her singing lessons had always been too much a matter of course to allow of shyness—but the sound of her voice in this big empty room had startled her. She did not think that she would be able to manage it here, and some of the children outside were standing on tiptoe, so as to look in at the windows. Annie struck a second chord, for she told herself that this feeling of alarm was foolish. Then she tried a scale, and after that she took out a song. It was the one she had been studying last at Cumberley. She sat still for a minute looking at the music, and conscientiously trying to recall all the directions of Miss Felt, the singing mistress, with regard to *fortes* and *pianos* and *staccatos* and *legatos*. Then she began, with her eyes on the notes,

Voi che sapete che cosa è amor—

Her voice was a fine mezzo-soprano, but very insufficiently tutored—not by any means “finished,” whatever Annie herself might be. She was not singing for effect, neither did she make any attempt to sing consecutively. Every passage that seemed to her imperfect was repeated twice and even three times, just as she had been used to do in the schoolroom under Miss Felt’s supervision. By degrees, as she warmed to her task, she forgot that she was not in the schoolroom. When she looked up after the last chord, she was quite astonished to find herself sitting in this big strange apartment, and still more astonished to see an officer in a blue uniform standing in the doorway and watching her from afar. At the thought of the many unsuccessful *legatos* she could not help colouring a little.

Luigi had arrived much too early for the social *réunion* in the Cursalon, for although he knew that the road took only an hour, he had for some unexplained reason given himself three hours to do it in. While he wandered through the empty building where everyone was dressing

for dinner, the sound of music had drawn him towards the Cursalon. He stood in the doorway, looking and listening, and not feeling quite certain whether this young girl in the white dress and with the smooth brown hair was indeed his acquaintance of yesterday. It was only when at the end of the song she raised her serious, brown eyes that he felt quite certain. And now he noticed, too, that she had a small bunch of the pink river flowers stuck into the belt of her dress. At sight of her momentary confusion he turned abruptly and went back into the passage. That vivid blush had made him feel guilty of an indiscretion. It seemed almost as bad as though he had been eavesdropping.

In the long corridor he met an asthmatic old Milanese, who was a standing patient of the establishment.

"Ah! by my soul, it's Roccatelli! So you're actually here again! Going to start the old game over again, eh? Or have you got a new one? Have I said good evening to you, by the bye?"

"Good evening," said Luigi, a trifle sternly. "Can you tell me who the young lady is who is singing in the Cursalon?"

"That—hum—why that is our newest arrival, *la bella Inglese*—only been here two days. Immense sensation—put all the women into a bad humour and all the men into a good one. Can't tell you her name—it's something awful and English. Pst—there's the happy father in person."

Luigi looked round, and saw advancing along the corridor and attired in evening dress the same herculean person whom he had seen in his mother's drawing-room two days ago. Something about the discovery, and more particularly about the evening coat, depressed him unaccountably, but only for a moment. In the next he had eagerly

stepped forward and was claiming acquaintance with his mother's guest.

"I believe I have had the pleasure of meeting you before—pray allow me to recall myself to your memory."

It was Luigi's honest intention to ask for a favour, and his honest belief that he was doing so, therefore it could not be his fault if the words sounded as though he were conferring one.

"I also had the good fortune to speak to your daughter yesterday, but I do not feel the right to approach her without a formal introduction. Would you have the grace to present me to the signorina?"

"I'll risk three years of purgatory," remarked the Conte Perghini to himself, as he looked after the two retreating figures, "three years of the hottest purgatory, that that devil of a boy is up to a new game this time."

Annie, still sitting at the piano, all at once became aware that her father was approaching her with an officer—the same that had stood in the doorway, she supposed. He was very dark—could it also be the same she had met yesterday; or were all officers black-haired here?

Mr. Brand had only just got through a somewhat mutilated form of introduction when the dinner-bell rang.

Annie rose immediately, and began putting her music together. She had not yet spoken a word to her new acquaintance.

"Is it really so late?" said Luigi. He had often before heard the dinner-bell here, but the sound had never appeared to him so annoying as to-day. "Let me do that for you. I will take care of your music."

She thanked him with a formal little inclination of the head, and followed her father out of the room.

Luigi stood and watched until the last fold of her white dress had disappeared through the doorway. Then he sat

down at the piano and began turning over the leaves of the music, though he was no player himself and could barely decipher the notes. Now and then he read some words of a song, but not with any particular attention, and now and then he struck a few chords at haphazard. Between whiles he kept glancing towards the door, and once he drew out his watch. The *table d'hôte* always was a lengthy affair. Luigi left the piano and wandered out into the garden. Here there were only the children playing about, the gardeners watering the flower-beds, and a few patients taking the air under the arcades. These were the more serious cases, unfit for the noisy dinner-table. A few of them sat in wide armchairs upon wheels, their legs, even on this warm summer evening, carefully packed up in shawls. They conversed in undertones about their symptoms, or—in a still deeper undertone—exchanged their opinions regarding the doctor and the nurses. One or two of them sat silent with their heads sunk upon their breasts. Luigi passed them by and began to pace the empty walks, slowly and aimlessly, but always taking care not to lose sight of the front of the building. The red sunset clouds had sailed away by this time, and the whole sky was transparently clear. It was not dark yet, and yet it was not light any longer. With such a spotless sky as this it would take long to get entirely dark. The stars were very pale as yet and very few. Now and then Luigi stood still to listen; the gentle hiss of the watering-cans and the cries of the children were the only sounds to be heard. Presently these also ceased. The gardeners had finished their work, and the children had been taken off to bed. Then the nurses came out and wheeled the big chairs back into the house. Luigi went on pacing the walks, wondering a little at his own impatience. It seemed a long time before a sort of confused murmur came floating from the house, and pres-

ently resolved itself into voices. Out of each of the open doorways there streamed a well-dressed and chattering crowd, straight from the dinner-table, and in the best of good humours engendered by a French *cuisine* and Austrian wines. The flush of satiety was on more than one face; playful disputes, begun upstairs between young ladies and their neighbours, were being carried on here; and jokes, unintelligible to whoever had not dined at the *table d'hôte*, were still being exchanged, accompanied by many a reproachful and many a coquettish glance. A large percentage of the patients who dined at the *table d'hôte* had come here, not to be cured of any bodily ailment, but of such mental diseases as *ennui*, or a temporarily broken heart. They belonged to quite a different class from the swaddled figures in the big armchairs.

There was going to be no social *réunion*, after all, to-day. As if by common consent everyone had made straight for the garden. Such an evening as this could not be wasted in the Cursalon. Even the dancers felt this. A few minutes passed before the large groups began to break up and to disperse themselves in smaller groups all over the garden.

Luigi caught sight of a white dress and went towards it. It was not the one he was looking for. He made two or three more mistakes, and at last he found Annie sitting alone with her father on a bench in one of the side-walks.

"Is it permitted that I should sit down here?" he asked, standing still.

Annie started slightly, not immediately recognising him in the dusk.

"Have you brought my music?" she asked then without hesitation.

"Your music?"

"Yes. When I went to dinner you said that you would

take care of it. I thought you were bringing it to me now."

"I must ask a hundred pardons. I forgot all about the music. It is still lying on the piano, but I will fetch it immediately, if you wish."

He had half turned away when Mr. Brand rose suddenly to his feet.

"I'll see after the music," he decided, in a tone which put all idea of opposition out of the question. "You stop here and take care of Annie. I'll be back directly."

And he turned and tramped away up the walk. "The Principessa herself couldn't have done that better," he chuckled to himself as he went.

Luigi looked after him almost in consternation. To sit on a bench in the dusk beside an unchaperoned young girl was, as he knew well enough, a grave offence against the formalities of Italian society. He had done so before, it is true, but this time the bare idea of it frightened him in a way which he did not know how to account for. If it had not been too ridiculous he would have liked to call Mr. Brand back. He looked doubtfully at Annie, half afraid of increasing her confusion, but to his surprise there was no confusion whatever visible upon her face. She sat there quite serenely, and seemed to be wondering why he should prefer to stand.

There was plenty of room on the bench. Luigi sat down as far as he could from Miss Brand, and for several minutes said nothing at all. At last he turned towards her.

"You are very fond of music, I suppose?" he asked, a little diffidently.

"Yes, I am fond of music; but why do you suppose so?"

"Because I heard you singing."

"You would have heard me singing even if I was not fond of music. I was only practising the songs which Miss Felt taught me, and because I don't want father to have wasted his money upon my singing lessons."

"You have got a fine voice."

"Yes, I know I have got a fine voice," said Annie readily. "Miss Felt told me so."

Luigi could not help feeling astonished. He had never yet paid a compliment to a young lady without being answered by a more or less graceful deprecation. Instinctively he had expected the same here, and he could not even feel certain whether the want of it pleased him or not.

"That song suits your voice particularly well, only you don't pronounce the Italian quite as it ought to be."

"Which song do you mean?"

"*Voi che sapete*. Now, for instance, your *sapete* sounds as though it had two *t's* in it. It should be more drawn out, like this: *sape-te*."

"*Sape-te*," repeated Annie carefully. "Is that right?"

"It is better. And then—if you will permit me to make the remark—you do not always give the right expression to the words."

"That is very possible," said Annie, thoughtfully, "because I do not understand them. If I had stayed one year longer at school I should have learnt Italian, for it is one of the 'final subjects.'"

"But did not your singing mistress explain to you what the words meant? How could she expect you to do justice to the song unless you knew what you were singing about?"

Annie considered the matter for a moment.

"I don't think that Miss Felt understood the words herself."

"This is terrible," said Luigi, with profound conviction.

"What is terrible?"

"Why, the idea of mutilating such a masterpiece through simple ignorance. It is enough to make Mozart leap out of his grave, the poor *maestro*! See, I am no musician myself, although I adore music, and I have never seen Miss Felt, and yet I already hate her for this crime. Did she never tell you that a song must be sung with the *soul* as well as with the voice? Did she give you no instructions?"

Luigi's momentary diffidence had completely vanished; he was talking with all the warmth of a nature which has just been touched upon one of its most sensitive points. With his right hand he had broken off a twig of a bush close by, and was twirling it between his fingers as he spoke. He had shifted his position slightly, so as to be able to see his companion's face. His shining eyes were fixed upon her with an almost stern inquiry.

Annie did not immediately answer. She was wondering within herself whether it was quite right to *adore* anything except one's Maker. "Adore," "hate," "crime," all these expressions seemed to her much too strong for the occasion, and somewhat disturbed her.

"Yes, Miss Felt gave me a great many instructions," she said at last. "She told me at which sign I was to sing more loudly and at which more softly; on which notes I was to stop long, and——"

Luigi uttered an impatient exclamation and threw away the twig which he had been holding.

"That is not it. Let us leave Miss Felt. When you know the story of the song you will not require any more printed signs. I once heard it sung at a concert by a celebrated singer—perhaps that is why I cannot bear to hear it

murdered. The story is very simple. It is a young man who does not understand his own mind; he loves, and does not know that he loves; he suspects, but is not sure. Therefore he goes to the women, of whom he knows that they cannot live without love, and says to them: '*Voi che sapete*—You who know what love is, tell me, women, whether I have it in my heart.' Then he tells them what he feels; it is new to him, he does not know how to grasp it. '*Gelo e poi sento l'anima avvampar, e in un momento torno a gelar.*' That means that he feels in one moment as cold as ice, and in the next moment as hot as fire, and in the third moment he is cold again. '*Ricerco un bene*——' How shall I translate this? Let me see—what he wants to say is that he feels a desire, a thirst for something, some great good that stands outside himself, which he does not know how to name, neither does he know who holds this good; he does not even know what the good is. I don't know if I have explained myself rightly; it is a sort of feeling that one sometimes has, but which it is difficult to put into words."

Luigi had pulled off another of the twigs that were hanging over his shoulder, and was stripping the leaves from it as he rapidly talked.

Annie was silent, not being able conscientiously to say that the final explanation was entirely clear to her. However, she resolved to examine the question at leisure.

"I sigh and lament without wishing it," resumed Luigi, and then interrupted himself with a half laugh. "That is to say, *I* do not do so, but Cherubino does so in the '*Nozze di Figaro*.' I tremble and palpitate without knowing it—*non trovo pace notte ne dì; ma pur mi piace languir così*—I find no peace day and night; and yet it pleases me thus to languish. The whole passage must be sung always *accelerando*—quicker and quicker, breathlessly, I should

say, until at the *ma pur ma piace* it gets suddenly slow, almost dragged out. Do you understand how I mean it?"

"I think so," said Annie, and an instant later she added: "That about his feeling hot and cold sounds a little as though he were a fever patient, and the women a doctor, or a conclave of doctors, to whom he had come with his symptoms."

Luigi looked at her in startled inquiry, but from what he could see of her face it was clear that the remark was quite innocent of any intention of sarcasm. This style of remarks, as well as the deliberation with which they were made, was new to him and opposed to his nature, and yet they were not unpleasant, for he felt that they were honest, just as he instinctively guessed that the deliberation did not arise from stupidity, but rather from an over-conscientious desire to speak the truth.

"Well, and supposing he is a patient," he said upon impulse, "love is a fever, is it not?"

"That may be," said Annie calmly.

And then Luigi began to give more minute instructions as to the execution of the song, speaking with animation and intensity, and with occasional gestures which helped him to emphasise his meaning. While Annie listened the satin cap and the meagre profile of her singing mistress rose before her mind's eye, and she felt more than ever certain that Miss Felt had not known what she was singing about. At the same time she could not help reflecting that these gestures were superfluous, and that words alone—and more moderate words too—would have been quite as intelligible to her.

"Thank you," she said when Luigi broke off. "I shall study the song over again."

Luigi had finished speaking, and Annie too sat for a while silent, breathing in the warm, scented air. From his

end of the bench Luigi could just see the pure outline of her profile against a square of starlit sky. Under cover of the dusk he felt that he could allow his eyes to rest upon the picture. He was glad that it was dusk and not daylight, for the picture satisfied the craving for beauty in every form which belongs not only to his nation, but with him was individual. Voices could be heard through the bushes, but except for an occasional group that passed chattering up this side-walk, they had been practically alone all the time.

"There must be mignonette somewhere near," said Annie all at once. "It reminds me of Cumberley. We had so much mignonette there."

Luigi drew his brows together without answering. He wished she had not spoken—he wished she had not moved. The outline of the profile had been disturbed, and he had been brought back to common things.

"Father cannot have found the music," she said after another pause. "I wish I had put it back into the portfolio myself."

"You will never trust me again, I suppose," said Luigi. It was a remark that ought by rights to have been made in a playful tone, but it sounded, on the contrary, quite serious and a little dreamy.

"How can I say whether I can trust you or not when I don't know you at all? Perhaps you have only got a bad memory."

"I don't think I have got a bad memory, but I was thinking of other things. Is that very wrong?"

"Why do you ask me? You should know better than I."

"I feel that I should like to know your opinion."

"I don't know if it is wrong, but I think that one *ought to do entirely whatever one does.*"

"Even if it is putting music back in a portfolio?"

"Yes, whether it be putting music back in a portfolio or winning a battle. Just in the same way I also think that one ought to *be* entirely what one is—whether it be a workman or a soldier, or a king or a bootblack. I mean," finished Annie in some confusion, perceiving that she had got entangled in a sermon on morals—"I only mean that I don't think it is quite honest not to put one's soul into whatever one is, or at least is trying to be."

"Ah!" said Luigi quickly, as though his attention had been arrested anew. "What is that you say? That interests me."

"There is father coming at last," said Annie in some relief. "I wonder if he has found the music."

There was no moon to light Luigi on his way across the valley, but such a night as this requires no moon. The mild and even light of millions of stars was a safer guide than the sharp white lights and deceptive black shadows of the most perfect full moon. To-night there were none of those surprises that moonlight brings with it—no bushes masquerading as monsters, and no grass blades transformed into the likeness of serpents—none of those startling discoveries that cause the hearts of nervous people to leap into their mouths. The starlight is far less sensational than moonlight; it does not deal in grand effects, and is content to spread an equally woven veil of silver over hill and valley, earth and water alike.

Luigi, who knew every stone of the path by heart, could have dispensed even with the stars. Two years ago he had often gone this way. He walked slowly, his head bare to the motionless air, his military cap in one hand, while the other rested on the hilt of his sword, which else was apt to trail on the path and disturb his reflections by clashing against the stones of the river bed. Mozart's air was still

humming in his head. He was saying to himself that he had never before had a conversation just like the one of this evening with any young lady of his acquaintance—but had he ever before met a young lady who was exactly like this one? He did not think so. He shut his eyes for a moment and tried to recall the outline of her profile against the flickering stars behind, and as he recalled it he felt the blood mounting slowly to his forehead. Then he remembered how round had been the arm that rested upon her lap, delicately veiled by the muslin sleeve. Something like a shiver of cold ran over his limbs. And yet the night was so warm.

Voi che sapete——

CHAPTER XI.

ANNIE'S CATECHISM.

It was two days after the evening spent in the Curhaus gardens that the ragged urchin whom Mr. Brand had occasionally seen herding goats in the river-bed brought him a note from the Principessa.

"Bring me your daughter immediately," the note ran. 'Something has happened which renders it indispensable, that I should see her without further delay. I know it is a risk, but I have sent Luigi to Terrente, where he is to have the pictures valued. He will not be back till to-morrow. Tell her that I am anxious to cultivate English conversation.'

"We're going to walk across the valley this afternoon," said Mr. Brand, half an hour later, to Annie. And with an attempt at joviality he added, "There's a lady over there who wants to practise her English upon you."

Mrs. Brand timidly cleared her throat.

"But won't the road be very bad, Thomas, after the rain? Annie was a little tired last time, and——"

It was the feeblest of efforts to fight against Fate, and she knew it to be so. If Thomas willed that Annie should be taken to the Principessa, of course she would be taken, whether a road led thither or not. This Principessa, whom she was continually hearing of now, but had never yet seen, inspired her with a nameless terror. She trembled before

her in thought as before the person in whose hand lay Annie's happiness or misery. Annie herself could not in the least understand why her mother could never look at her nowadays with dry eyes. The moist gaze which was apt to follow her about the room irresistibly reminded her of the way in which people are supposed to look at a lamb that is being led to slaughter.

For some reason, unintelligible to his daughter, Mr. Brand was very careful about going down the back staircase to-day, and when addressed by an acquaintance he hurriedly replied that he was only going out for a little air. It looked almost as though he would have preferred to leave the Curhaus unobserved. The slight air of mystery attending the whole proceedings made Annie feel as though she were being taken to some forbidden rendezvous.

There had been a sudden and violent thunderstorm in the night, and the two threads of green water which usually slipped between the river-stones like a pair of green snakes had swollen to two angry streams. It was not possible to pursue the usual path. Another road had to be looked for and a good many boulders to be clambered over. Mr. Brand thought nothing of them himself, but he seemed greatly astonished that the delicately clad and eminently high-class young woman by his side should be able to make any progress. He had by no means yet recovered from the astonishment which her first appearance had caused him, and whenever he touched her he did so in the way that children touch a brand-new toy, cautiously and fearfully, as though he were afraid to rub off any of this marvellous gloss of education and manners which had issued so spotless from Miss Bellew's hands.

The sight of the big empty rooms and of the solitary old woman sitting before the empty fireplace took immediate and violent possession of Annie's imagination. She had

never seen anything or anybody like it before, and at the sound of her footsteps echoing on the stone floor her heart tightened suddenly with an unexplained fear which seemed like a foreboding.

The Principessa was engaged in her usual occupation of doing nothing.

"Ah, Signor Brand," had been her greeting, "so you really have found the leisure to bring your daughter to the Monastero? This is remarkably kind of you. I did not expect you, with these bad roads, to-day. Why did you hurry so? Another day would have done as well."

The tone was perfectly easy, and the surprise expressed was unmistakable though not too elaborate. She even pronounced her words rather more leisurely than usual, and yet it required the whole strength of her will to repress the excitement which devoured her, as a very keen observer would have known by the expansion of the pupils and the slight movements of the fingers that held the fan.

"But I certainly understood," began Mr. Brand, and then, meeting her eye, he relapsed into submissive silence. He could scarcely restrain himself from asking what it was that had happened, but, to-day as ever, the big man was as wax in her hands. Within these walls he never was quite the same man as without them. His usual almost impertinent assurance of demeanour was invariably left at the gate of the Monastero, and, oddly enough, even his manner of moving over the grey flagstones bore a certain resemblance to a person balancing himself upon a sheet of ice.

The Principessa began to talk about the storm in the night and of the damage which it would probably have occasioned in the mountains. She addressed her remarks principally to Mr. Brand, and took apparently so little notice of the girl that Annie, sitting by and listening, could not help reflecting that this was a strange way of practising

English upon her. Her eyes wandered round and round the big room and alighted upon the water-colour portrait on the wall. It seemed in a sort of distant way to be familiar to her, and yet she could not have said exactly whom it reminded her of. While she was still puzzling out the question, the Principessa turned unexpectedly towards her.

"The execution of the picture is good, is it not? England is the home of water-colour, so perhaps you may be able to judge. Are you a lover of art?"

"Annie got the first prize for drawing at Miss Bellew's," remarked Mr. Brand, as carelessly as he could.

"No, I did not," said Annie abruptly. She could not help wondering how the Principessa had guessed that she was looking at the water-colour, while to all appearance engrossed in conversation.

"That is to say I got it, but I gave it back again to Miss Bellew before I left Cumberland."

"The deuce you did!" said Mr. Brand aghast. "What for?"

The Principessa said nothing, but behind her fan her eyes might have been seen to light up with interest.

"I did not think that I had earned it. There were other girls in the school who drew better than I, and if Miss Bellew gave it to me it was probably because of—because she always favoured me."

She had meant to say "because of my money," but had remembered in time that he preferred the people about here not to know how wealthy he was, since he wished to keep clear of begging letters.

"And you think that a prize ought not to be a favour?" asked the Principessa from behind her fan.

"I think so, because that would mean an injustice."

"Ah, well. And what did your companions say to your renunciation?"

"I was only laughed at for my pains, but I am glad I did it."

"Ah, well," said the Principessa again, still slowly fanning herself. "But even if you did not deserve the first prize, that is no reason why you should therefore be a bad artist. I used to be very fond of water-colour painting myself. If you will bring me the portfolio that is standing over there against the wall, I will show you a few old landscapes of the country about here."

Annie fetched the portfolio and sat down upon a chair that was much nearer to the Principessa. There was now only the breadth of the small inlaid table between them. The Principessa took up her gold eye-glasses as though to recognise the pictures more easily.

"This is a view of some ruins that stand not far from here, higher up in the mountains. It is all that remains of the original seat of this family. The cradle of the race, people call it."

Annie took the sheet held towards her, and examined the rough but spirited sketch with interest. As she looked up with a question on her lips, she almost started in astonishment. She had met the black eyes of the Principessa fixed upon her face with a gaze of such intense scrutiny that it brought the blood to her cheeks. It was not by any means an unkind gaze, quite the contrary, but it was too piercing and too close to be borne without confusion.

The Principessa made haste to hand her another picture, but Annie did not look at it with the same interest as the last. While she kept her eyes fixed upon the sheet she was asking herself what it was that this old lady had been looking for in her face, and why she had been looking for it.

From art the conversation passed lightly and easily to music and literature, as well as to a good many other sub-

jects—such as town and country life, society, and even politics. Looking back at this conversation later, Annie could not help wondering a little at her own readiness to talk so openly to an entire stranger, and at her own fluency in giving her opinions and discussing her individual tastes. In recollection she seemed to hear only her own voice speaking, while all that the Principessa had done was to listen and occasionally drop a question. But at the time it all seemed not only perfectly natural, but even unavoidable, and neither then nor later did the idea occur to Annie that she was being put through an exhaustive catechism.

When music was touched upon, the Principessa turned with a pretty imploring gesture towards her guest.

"It would be so charming of you if you would play one little thing. See that dusty old harmonium in the corner—I have not heard its voice for years. We used to have it in the chapel."

The girl rose readily, but a ragged wax-cloth cover had first to be removed, and then Annie, to whom the big room with the stone floor gave the sensation of being in a church, tried an *Agnus Dei* of Handel's, which had been one of the standard "pieces" at Cumberley. Unfortunately two of the most required notes were dumb, and several more were hoarse; but Annie worked bravely on until the final chord, having been taught never to leave a thing half-finished.

"She's a musician, isn't she?" asked Mr. Brand, thankful that it was over.

"It is impossible to judge upon this poor instrument," replied the Principessa, *sotto voce*. "I don't know yet whether she is a musician, but nevertheless I do know what I wanted to know, and I am well satisfied."

"Is it not time to be going back to mother—to mamma,

"I mean?" Annie's voice was heard from the further end of the room.

"Surely it is still early," said the Principessa, quickly, and for a moment she seemed to be reflecting upon what she should do next. Then an idea occurred to her.

"Oh, Signor Brand," and she turned abruptly towards him, "I cannot let you go yet. I have a question to ask, a difficulty in which, perhaps, you can help me. Wait, I will ring for Giacomo. The truth is that the little dog that belongs to my son"—it was the first reference that she had made to her son that day—"has got its front paw crushed under the gate. The poor little beast suffers great pain, I fear. I do not know what can be done to relieve it. Perhaps you can inform me?"

"I know nothing about dogs," grumbled Mr. Brand a little sulkily, but the Principessa had apparently not heard his remark.

When Giacomo had brought a small shivering yellow bundle into the room and deposited it upon a footstool, Annie drew near with somewhat tremulous interest. The mangled paw was swaddled in blood-stained rags, and the whole expression of the delicately furrowed yellow countenance was one of deepest self-commiseration. The piteous eyes were so irresistible, that while the Principessa was consulting with her father as to the mode of treatment Annie knelt down beside the footstool and gently hitched the invalid into her arms, far more successfully than she had managed the *bambino* a few days ago. The Principessa saw her do it, though she gave no sign. While discussing plasters and ointments she had indeed not lost sight of a single movement of the girl. She saw even the tears of pure childish pity that had started to her eyes; she would have counted these tears, if she could, and within herself she gauged their value and drew her conclusions, and once more she

felt satisfied. To Mr. Brand, however, the discussion appeared to be unduly prolonged. He had given up attempting to understand what the Principessa was up to. Not all his awe of his hostess could keep his patience even for one minute longer from snapping. All at once it gave way. Annie heard him push back his chair.

"I'm off," he remarked in his broad workman's English, which always got several shades broader in moments of irritation, and getting to his feet as he spoke. "There's been enough of this sort of thing, I fancy. It wasn't in order to doctor this beast's paw, was it, that you sent for me to-day? I've told you that I'm about as good at prescribing for a dog as I should be at dancing a jig with a flea. There—that's enough for to-day. Come along, Annie."

Mr. Brand looked revengefully towards the Principessa. It was one of those moments in which the sturdy artisan within him felt a sort of savage satisfaction in openly rebelling against that influence which he yet knew quite well that he could not permanently escape.

Annie had likewise risen, but instead of obeying instantly, as was her habit, she stood immovable, staring across the room at her father as though at an utter stranger. Never before had he appeared to her so big and so clumsy as he did at this moment, sharply contrasted as he stood there with the delicate, high-bred figure in the armchair. A sudden sense of discouragement came over Annie as she realised the chasm that lay between these two and understood that it never could be filled up. When Ellen had spoken of the disadvantage of being better educated than one's parents, there had been truth in her words—a horrible, cruel truth—she knew it even as at the sound of her father's broad vowels, and at the very sight of the manner in which he held his hat the hot blood spread slowly all

over her face. The sound of the Principessa's voice recalled her to herself.

"A jig?" repeated the old lady with perfect self-possession; "I do not think that I am acquainted with that word. It is a sort of dance, I presume, but, strangely enough, I have not met the expression before."

"Of course not," said Annie, turning straight towards her hostess and speaking with quick-flying breath and shining eyes. It had suddenly occurred to her that the Principessa might suppose that she was ashamed of her father, and this must never be. "Of course you have not met this expression before, as well as a great many other expressions which father, or which all of us use. Probably you have never before met such people as we are, for you are a great lady, I suppose, while we are only working-people who have made every penny of our own money, and are not ashamed of having made it either." She stooped as she spoke, and dropped the wounded Gyps almost a little roughly on to the footstool.

"Upon my soul, Annie, there's no call to be rude," remarked Mr. Brand in sudden consternation.

The Principessa merely raised one hand.

"Hush!" she said softly. "Let her speak. Perhaps she has more to say."

"I have nothing more to say," went on Annie, doggedly, "only this, that when a man has begun life as a workman and has struggled up to the top it is not fair to expect that he should speak with exactly the same accent as the people who have been born at the top, or that he should catch all their tricks of manner in half a year. Is he less honest or less reliable because he has got his own manner? If we are not good enough for you, why do you ask us to come and see you?"

Mr. Brand looked anxiously towards the Principessa.

If she were to take offence at these wild words, the consequences would be simply incalculable. But the Principessa had evidently no idea of taking offence. She was looking, on the contrary, more pleased and interested than Mr. Brand had ever seen her look, and was gazing expectantly at Annie, as though in hopes of hearing yet more. And Annie would have had more to say, but, meeting this look of kindly interest, she felt suddenly disconcerted. When the Principessa called her to her side Annie went without hesitation, relapsing mechanically into her schoolroom habits, and when, to the girl's astonishment, the old lady drew her head towards her and pressed an impulsive kiss upon her forehead, she submitted without a word.

"I think we two will be good friends," was all the remark which the Principessa had made, and even as she made it Annie wondered why her voice should sound unsteady. After all, they were but strangers to each other.

"Go now," she added, still a little tremulously, and gently pushing the girl from her. "Go to the garden and fetch some carnations for your hair. They will look exquisite there, and Giacomo will show you the way. Go, my child; your father will keep me company meanwhile."

Annie was glad to go, for she felt hot and foolish, and yet she knew that she could not have acted otherwise than she had done. As she turned thankfully towards the door, steps were heard at the other side.

"It is Giacomo," said the Principessa, and then more quickly she added, "Surely it cannot be Luigi?"

She was still saying it when already Luigi had pushed aside the curtain. His appearance was followed by a momentary silence. The Principessa and Mr. Brand looked at each other like a pair of discovered conspirators, while Luigi, finding himself face to face with Annie Brand, *started back* in astonishment. Annie did not start, but

she too felt surprised, having had no idea that the master of the wounded terrier and her musical instructor of the other evening were identical.

The Principessa's composure never left her for long.

"Signor Brand and his daughter have been kind enough to help me in passing the long day without you," she explained easily and gracefully. "It has not been an accident, I hope, that brings you back?"

A bridge further down the river had been damaged by last night's rain, Luigi explained. The communication with Terrente would not be restored until the following day.

"Let us be thankful that it is no worse. I should have thought of the bridges. Luigi, the Signorina Brand is anxious to gather some carnations. Giacomo was to have shown her the way, but since you have arrived at the right time you will do better than Giacomo. I fancy you must have made the Signorina's acquaintance at the Cursalon."

Luigi did not say whether this was so or not, but silently held back the curtain for Annie to pass out. The Principessa sat listening so long as she could hear their steps. When she turned towards Mr. Brand, there was a happy smile upon her lips.

"Yes, let them go, let them go," she said gently. "Let them gather together as many carnations as they can. At last my mind is at ease."

"And now let's hear the news," said Mr. Brand with a sigh of relief. "Surely we've had enough shilly-shallying for one day. I'm just panting for a few plain words. Come, now, what's this thing that has happened?"

"Tell me, Signor Brand," asked the Principessa, still smiling, "do you still think that your daughter is a good, quiet girl, and easy to manage? I am not of your opinion.

She is good certainly, but she is not nearly so quiet as she looks, and she will by no means be easy to manage."

"But the thing that has happened?"

"The thing that has happened is very simple—it is only that that which I have been praying for has come to pass. Luigi is no longer master of his affections. He already belongs to your daughter."

"How do you know it? Has he spoken to you?"

"Not a word," said the Principessa, still with that radiant smile upon her lips. "He has not so much as pronounced her name to me. You look disappointed. Can't you understand? To be sure, you are a man; one must make allowances for you. It was exactly of his talking to me that I was afraid; he has talked to me so often before. I have had glowing descriptions of all his five *adoratas* at Bleistadt. The day after his visit to the Cursalon I was trembling lest he should launch into a description of your daughter. What would it have meant? Why, that she was his sixth *adorata*, to be sure; and that would not have suited my plans at all. But he did not do anything of the kind. He talked a great deal, indeed. All day yesterday he was as joyful as a child—even a butterfly sailing past made him laugh. He embraced me every half-hour without any reason. There were moments when, if I had not known him so well, I might have believed him to be drunk. But of her, the heavens be thanked! never a word. You do not know, perhaps, that true love in a healthy nature always begins by being joyful—unreasonably joyful; the sighs do not come until the stage of self-analysis is reached. It was what I had wished and hoped for, and yet I tell you honestly that I was frightened at the result of my own work. I had not looked for anything quite so quick nor quite so strong. By evening I said to myself: 'This must not go further *before* I have seen the girl. Should she not be the right

wife for him, he must never set eyes upon her again. Soon it will be too late to undo my own plans.' That is why I sent for you to-day. Now I know all that I wanted to know, and my heart is light again. Let them gather as many carnations as they like!"

"And this is all that has happened?" asked Mr. Brand a little blankly.

"It is more than you suppose. You could not guess how much depended upon this hour that has passed. Within these sixty minutes I have sounded every corner of your daughter's nature, and now I know her as though she were my own child. I know that she is honest and that she is brave. I know also that she has no unreasonable vanity, or she never would have consented to play on that crazy old harmonium. By the way she handled the broken notes I know that she is patient, and by the way she held the wounded dog I know that her heart is of gold. I love her for the angry words which she flung into my face. Miss Bellew has indeed accomplished wonders, but—the Heavens be praised for it!—she has not been able to polish away the individuality of her pupil. Luigi is welcome to love her, since I love her already myself. Now that I have seen her I can even forgive her for not being golden-haired. I like a face that can be taken in at a glance. Luigi's mood is comprehensible to me now, for this is the sort of beauty that does its work swiftly. The girl will require more time, partly because she is a girl, and partly because of the northern blood in her veins. It is even better so. For a woman it is always a fault to be over-liberal with her heart. We can afford a little time. There are five weeks yet till the end of August."

"I thought the Prince had got leave of absence till the middle of September?"

"So he has," said the Principessa a little hastily, as though

she had recollected something. "But there is no reason why the matter should not be settled before the end of August. Looking ahead, I can see only one danger to our plan, but it need not necessarily arise. In the whole wide world there is only one person whom I dread in this matter—perhaps foolishly, perhaps groundlessly—— By the bye, Signor Brand, did you remember to bring me the list of the new arrivals?"

She almost snatched from Mr. Brand's fingers the slip of paper he held towards her. When, after a minute of earnest perusal, she looked up again, her features had regained their serenity.

"Everything is safe so far," she observed, slowly tearing the paper to atoms. "Be certain that you never forget to bring me the list."

Meanwhile, in the garden outside, Annie had gathered as many carnations as her hands could hold, and, with Luigi by her side, was moving towards the pavilion. He watched her thoughtfully as she sorted her bunch. Altogether, he struck her as being much more silent to-day than he had been two days ago.

"How do you mean that it is not honest not to be entirely what one is?" he abruptly inquired. "What do you call being entirely what one is?"

"I mean that one ought to try and fill entirely whatever place one has been given in the world, whether it be a high place or a low place."

When she came to think over the matter later on, Annie could not help wondering how she had been able immediately to understand what it was that Lieutenant Roccatelli was referring to by that unexpected question, but at the moment itself that which he said seemed to her to be the natural continuation of the talk that had been interrupted *in the Curhaus gardens.*

"Then according to your theory a man who is at heart a Socialist could not honestly wear the uniform of a royal or imperial soldier?"

"A Socialist?" repeated Annie, slightly troubled, much in the same way that her father had been troubled by the same word not long ago.

"Yes. Supposing a man living under an oligarchy to be firmly convinced that this is a mistaken form of government, and that the only hope for mankind at large lies in a Socialistic community, is this man justified in receiving his pay from the hands of an emperor whom in his heart of hearts he would like to see dethroned? There's a problem for you! I know a man in that position, and I have often put the question to myself, 'Is he a mean swindler or not?' What is your opinion?"

"This man you speak of is paid for drilling his soldiers, is he not, and for obeying his superiors?"

"Exactly."

"And does he do it?"

"To the best of his ability."

"Then how can he be a swindler? He does the work he is paid for. He is not paid for his thoughts; those belong to himself; and very likely," she added as an after-thought, "those thoughts are not really so dangerous to the Emperor as they seem to himself."

Luigi looked at her in some astonishment without answering, and at that same instant the Principessa was saying to Mr. Brand:

"They will have gathered enough carnations by this time. You had better call your daughter. It is a mistake to make the path too smooth at first."

CHAPTER XII.

DANIEL SILBERHERZ.

THE warm summer weeks that followed upon Annie's first visit to the Monastero were so like each other in their general outline, that when in after-years she used to look back upon this period of her life very few of the days seemed to possess a physiognomy of their own. It was all very smooth and very pleasant, though as yet it had not occurred to her to call it exciting.

There were, to begin with, the many peaceful hours spent beside her mother in the Curhaus gardens, which were a joy in themselves alone. There were also those other hours, scarcely less peaceful, when she used to sit beside the white-haired Principessa and listen to the tales of a far-away, long-past world ; for in these days Annie often stood at the door of the grim, grey palace among the hills. The loneliness of that old woman with the fiery black eyes and the austere lips seemed to call for companionship, and the girl gave it all the more readily as she became aware that the sympathy between them was mutual.

"My heart is not soft," the Principessa said to Annie one day, "but it has got soft places in it, and I think one of them is meant for you."

At first there were some things which surprised Annie a good deal.

"Do you never grow tired of doing nothing?" she once asked her new friend.

"I am always doing something," replied the Principessa serenely. "I am much busier than you are, child. For thirty years I studied men, twenty more years I spent in trying to find in those books over there all the men I have ever met in the world outside, and now I sit here and think over it all. I shall not be done thinking before I die."

Very soon Annie began to understand that the Principessa's idle, white hands were an inseparable part of her individuality. Had she been a German she would probably have knitted endless stockings; an Englishwoman might perhaps have put out her eyes over some fine embroidery. Only an Italian could be capable of doing nothing so gracefully.

The quaint sayings that were framed in the Principessa's irregularly picturesque English sounded sometimes as though they were meant for skilfully conveyed instructions. One day, to her surprise, Annie even got something like a scolding. She had walked across the valley early in the afternoon, accompanied by her maid, and by some chance she had forgotten to bring a parasol. The Principessa was quite agitated when Annie came in, flushed and tired.

"Without a parasol, in this sun! *Figlia mia*, do you know what you are doing? You are sinning against Providence! Yes, smile if you like; no doubt you feel so safe now that you think a little sunburn is but a trifle. But wait a little; you will soon learn that it is madness to play games even with the most perfect beauty on earth."

And then the Principessa began to expound her views on this subject.

"The preservation of beauty is one of woman's highest duties, but also most difficult tasks. There are so many different ways of becoming ugly. There is the way of shrivelling up, the way of expanding, the way of getting too white, the way of getting too red. Many other ways

The first of these fell early in August, and consequently early in her acquaintance with Luigi. On that day she had come to see him in a new aspect.

Once again she was sitting beside the Principessa's chair. It was very hot outside, but behind the thick walls of the Monastero it was as cool as in a church, and also as still—still, probably, than it had been at the time when the figures of black-veiled nuns had stolen along the pillared corridors and chanted their orisons behind barred doorways, for, as Annie now knew, the palace had originally been a convent. At first the grated windows and the absence of all ornament had made her think that it must have been a prison.

Luigi, too, was in the room. He had entered unobserved while his mother was answering some question of Annie's.

"My child, I will not deny it. There do come moments when I long to look again into the face of the world outside, when a craving comes over me to feel another roof above my head and to tread upon some grass that does not grow between these walls. But these are only moments of weakness; they pass again. My lot is not harder than that of the holy women who lived and died behind these gratings. Their vow, indeed, had been made for heaven, while mine is of the earth, only a sacrifice to the honour of an earthly name."

"And what has that earthly name deserved of you in return for this sacrifice?" said Luigi's voice beside his mother's chair.

The Principessa started slightly. "It is you, Luigi? I had not heard you. When did you come in?"

"If you owed your happiness, or at least your comfort, to this empty name," went on Luigi with brows somewhat down-drawn, "there might be sense in the sacrifice, but this

way—— So there *do* come moments, do there, *madre mia*, when you have a craving to escape from your cage? It is not all such perfect delight as you would have me believe? And all for this name! How long, oh! how long will the day still be of coming when all these follies shall be swept from the earth?"

"Longer than you or I, or Miss Brand either, will live to see," replied the Principessa lightly, and smiling at Annie as she spoke. It was evident to her that Luigi had forgotten that they were not alone, as he was apt to do in moments of emotion. He looked towards Annie now and sat down silently, though it was evident that he had been on the point of saying more. His face still expressed annoyance, and his eyes kept returning to his mother's face with a look of mistrust and inquiry.

The Principessa was on the point of making some indifferent remark when something like a slight scuffle was heard in the library outside.

"Not in there," Giacomo's voice could be distinguished rapidly protesting; "the Principessa never receives visitors at this hour—she never receives visitors at any hour. Not in there, *per l'amor del ciel!*"

Luigi, who had scarcely sat down, sprang up again with a flush upon his face, and went quickly towards the library, but in the doorway already he ran against a stranger. He stepped back and measured him haughtily from head to foot. It was a majestic person, with a silky, brown beard very carefully combed, and so much dignity of demeanour that at first sight it would have been quite possible to mistake him for a gentleman. Luigi's instincts, however, were too keen to be deceived.

"Who are you?" he asked shortly. "And what is your business here?"

"My name is Daniel Silberherz," replied the stranger,

almost as haughtily as the young prince had spoken, "and my business is with the Principessa Roccatelli."

"It is the picture-dealer from Florence, Luigi," said the Principessa quickly.

"Did you send for him?"

"I did not."

"Then why are you here?" asked Luigi, as he turned once more towards the Jew. His tone was sharper now, for he had caught Annie Brand's eyes fixed in undisguised wonder upon Daniel Silberherz, and immediately he had been seized with a sense of shame at the idea of her being present at such a moment. Signor Silberherz could not have chosen a more unfavourable juncture for his appearance. To the former irritation, which had not yet been overcome, this fresh opportunity for breaking out was only too welcome.

"I am here," replied Signor Silberherz scornfully, "in order to demand a final answer. Happening to have business at Terrente, I came on here. My time is too precious to be wasted in useless correspondence. Are you willing, or are you not, to accept my offer for the paintings of which you know?" He looked past Luigi at the Principessa as he spoke.

"No, she is not willing," interrupted Luigi. "Hush, mother. Not so quick, Signor Silberherz—it is with me that you have to deal, not with my mother. You have heard that she never receives visitors, no, nor business-men either. Go into that other room if you have anything more to say; but it is scarcely necessary. I can tell you now, in my mother's name, that she does not wish to sell the pictures."

A change ran over Signor Silberherz's impassible features; his dignity seemed to falter a little.

"If it should only be a question of price," he began, still

looking towards the Principessa, as though he had more hope of her than of her son, "I should not be unwilling——"

"It is not a question of price," said Luigi, trembling with anxiety to put an end to the scene. By the sound of his own voice he knew that he was beginning to lose his self-control, but it was impossible to stop now. It had indeed flashed through his mind that Daniel Silberherz would probably be the only refuge from the money-lender at Bleistadt, whose bill would now be due in about three weeks, but at the present moment he felt only the desire to be rid of him at any price. It was all he could do to restrain himself from taking the picture-dealer by the shoulders and bundling him bodily out of the room.

"It is not a question of price, only a question of our own good-will. And now go, since you have had your final answer."

"And I am not to have the pictures?"

"You have heard so already. Now go."

A look of malice came into Silberherz's dark eyes. Instead of going immediately, he turned his head slowly from side to side, taking a close scrutiny of the apartment.

"A question of your good-will, you say," he repeated in a tone that was far more impertinent even than the glance. "From the look of your residence I should have supposed that it was rather a question of hunger and thirst, of enough wood to burn in the chimney, or enough——"

He broke off abruptly, with something like a cry. Luigi, white with rage and with his fingers clenched, had made two steps towards him. In one instant Daniel Silberherz became another creature. His long back bent suddenly, his shoulders slouched forward, his hands went up, as though to shield his classical features. As he stood there, shrunk

apparently to half his size, blinking up at Luigi with the eyes of a whipped dog, even the silky brown beard that was such a triumph of hairdressing seemed to be standing on end. Uncution and dignity had been but a thin shell ready to crumble at a touch—this was the real man.

Annie rose from her chair with a vague feeling of alarm. In his mother's presence she had never seen Luigi otherwise than gentle as a woman. She did not understand this change, and even as she asked herself what it was that was going to happen, she heard the Principessa's voice beside her.

"Luigi!" was all she said, and she said it very quietly, but the one word seemed to Annie to be spoken with a quite peculiar emphasis. It ran through the big room like a warning note.

The scene was changed as though by a stroke of magic. Annie, thinking of this a moment later, could scarcely follow all the details in her memory. Luigi had turned from the picture-dealer, and the next thing she remembered was seeing him kneeling beside his mother's chair, holding her hands, pressing them to his lips one after the other, and murmuring words that were unintelligible to her. She was not quite certain, but she almost thought that his cheeks had been wet. She supposed that she ought not to be looking on, ought not to be there at all, and yet she could not take her eyes from off the strange picture. She saw how, with a long-drawn sigh, he laid his head upon his mother's lap, and then it was that the Principessa looked across at her and smiled a little tremulously. The look brought her back to the actual reality. She made a movement as though to retire, but at the same instant Luigi rose to his feet and walked straight past her out of the room, his features still working with emotion. Daniel Silberherz had in the meantime completely disappeared.

Annie became aware that the Principessa was watching her with an expression of anxiety.

"It is time for me to be going," she said, shyly.

"Not yet; do not go yet, my child. You must let me explain first. I can see that you are startled by what has taken place, and it is only natural. Come and sit nearer to me, and I will explain."

The Principessa was talking eagerly, and still watching Annie as she spoke.

"But I think I understand quite well; he couldn't help being angry with that impertinent man——"

"It is not the anger I am speaking of—you have probably seen angry people before—but what must have seemed to you strange was to see him throw himself at my feet as he did, and speak to me as he spoke. It is not what you are accustomed to, because it is not what Englishmen do. I understand and appreciate the British prejudice against all outward display of emotion, but we Italians are differently made; we prefer to show what we have got. It may be better or not better, but it is so. An Italian who shows no feeling has probably got none to show. You cannot take the same standard for two nations. Though we show much outwardly, that does not mean that we are empty inside; though we speak words, we do not therefore neglect deeds. I trust that you understand me. It is no straw fire, even though it flash so brightly, but real flames, fed only too often with the heart's own blood. Tell me, do you think you understand?"

"I think I do," said Annie. And she really was aware of a certain relief in having the matter put before her in this light.

A few days after the scene thus recorded, Annie found Prince Roccatelli at the river inspector's house. The *bambino* having been attended to, Luigi started to accompany

Annie back towards the Curhaus, Rankin, the maid, following at a little distance.

"Do you know," he began, after being silent for some time, "I have been wanting very much to ask your advice?"

"My advice?" repeated Annie in astonishment.

"Yes, it is strange; but I feel a certain confidence in your judgment, though you are so young. I am sure you will tell me what you really think."

"But would not your mother know better?"

"My mother loves me too much; she would not tell me the truth. Love makes people blind, you know."

"And therefore you think it is better to ask a mere acquaintance—— Yes, I understand."

"Do you really understand?" said Luigi, with a touch of bitterness. "That is strange."

"I have long been wondering," he began again, after a short pause, "whether it is right for me to continue to be a soldier. Do you remember how I once told you that I knew a man who was at heart a Socialist and who yet took a soldier's pay? Well, that man is myself. The answer which you gave me then satisfied me for the moment, but the scruples have returned. What I am doing may not be a moral crime, but it is not what is called 'living up to one's convictions,' as I should wish to do."

"But what are your convictions?" asked Annie, a little bewildered. "I don't exactly understand what it is that the Socialists want; they are people, are they not, who think that the world is all wrong and want to set it right again?"

"No, they are not," answered Luigi with a sudden vehemence; "they do not *think* that the world is wrong, they *see* that it is wrong; the falseness of the whole order of *society* is staring them in the face, and they have bound

themselves to sacrifice their physical strength, their mental powers, their life, if necessary, to finding a solution to that same riddle which has already puzzled such men as Rousseau and Saint-Simon. Sooner or later it *must* be found, for it is the right of existence that we are fighting for—that is the whole name of the riddle—the sacred right which every man brings with him into the world as God's first gift, and which yet one half of the world denies to the other."

As Annie glanced at him in some astonishment, it occurred to her for the first time that Lieutenant Roccatelli was good-looking. She had often before noticed how the expression of his features and even of his figure was wont to accompany his words when he spoke under the influence of any emotion. At first it had struck her almost unpleasantly, but already she was growing used to it. It was as though his whole person, without any act of his will, were attempting to interpret that which he was saying. When he now spoke of the falseness of society he unconsciously clenched his teeth, at the words "physical strength" he squared his shoulders without knowing that he was doing it, and with his concluding words he stared straight and sternly in front of him with flashing eyes, almost as though that cruel half of the world which he was accusing stood before him, waiting for its verdict.

As for the words themselves, they seemed to Annie almost incomprehensible.

"I can't quite understand you," she said, thoughtfully. "Everything in the world has always seemed to me to be just as it ought to be; or at least," she corrected herself, as a passing doubt crossed her mind, "just as it can't help being."

"So it seems to all those who have got enough to eat and drink. But I know better. I know what those un-

fortunates suffer whose battle I have resolved to fight, for I have suffered those same things myself. I am betraying no secrets, since you have seen both my mother and myself in our ruined home."

Annie walked on for a little time in silence. Once she opened her lips as though to make some remark, but she said no word and only coloured deeply.

"You wanted to say something?" asked Luigi, watching her. "I beg of you to be quite open with me."

"I only wanted to ask whether you are quite sure that it is really only for the sake of those unfortunates that you want to overturn everything—whether you are not fighting your own battle more than you are aware of. I mean"—and Annie grew a little redder, but continued almost firmly—"I mean that if you were rich, instead of poor, do you not think that things would appear to you differently?"

Luigi bit his lip and kicked a pebble out of the path.

"I hope not," he said in a cooler tone, which yet betrayed some uneasiness. "I hope I am not thinking of myself, though no doubt it is hard to be quite impersonal, and besides—but that is not the point," he interrupted himself a little impatiently. "I had no intention of giving you a lecture on Socialism. It was your advice that I wanted to ask. Let us grant that Socialism is a fact. The question is this: for a Socialist who has got to work in order to support himself, what sort of work is at once possible and honest in the present state of the world? I have told you my doubts regarding the military career. What else is there? The truth is that I have not yet found my place in the world. I have thought of being a doctor. Doctors there will have to be in every state of society. But there is one great obstacle in the way. No one with my unhappy temper could dare to stand beside a sick-bed. Is not self-control the first indispensable necessity in a doctor's holy

mission? Perhaps you think I am exaggerating. You did not know what was happening two days ago in my mother's room when that man became impertinent. I think I might have murdered him if it had not been for her voice at the right moment. It has ever been so with me—I do not mind your knowing the truth. Rage takes away my senses—for a few minutes only, but during those few minutes I do not know what I am doing. It seems like a kind of disease over which I have no control. One day, I feel certain, it will wreck my life.”

He spoke low and despondently, and Annie felt a movement of sincere pity.

“If your mother's voice helped you so much the other day,” she said earnestly, “that can only be because you love her so much; therefore it is to your mother that you should always go for help.”

“My mother is not always with me,” he sadly replied.

“Then you should have some one else with you whom you love as much as your mother.”

Luigi gave her a startled look, but said nothing.

“You should marry, and have a wife whom you love and who loves you,” Annie had been on the point of saying, but the remark was never made. Afterwards she rather wondered why she had stopped short just at this point. Perhaps it was that startled look which had disconcerted her.

This was not the only question which arose in her mind as she looked back at the past conversation. For instance, had she not been rather hard upon Lieutenant Roccattelli when she taunted him with disapproving of the world for his own sake quite as much as for that of humanity at large? For the first time it struck her that the weapon might have been reversed, and that it was possible, just barely possible, that her own approval of the present ar-

rangements of the world had its root in the fact that they benefited herself.

This had been the second of those days which ever after preserved in her memory a physiognomy of their own. On that day it seemed to her that she had caught a glimpse, even though a very uncertain one, of a new view of life.

CHAPTER XIII.

“CHE COSA È AMOR,—”

AMONG the days which stood out from the agreeable sameness of the others there was yet another one, which towered far higher, or rather, which put an end to the agreeable sameness once and for ever. This day fell in the last week of August.

The second half of the month had as yet not been very different from the first. Quite lately it had struck Annie, indeed, that her father's temper was becoming daily more uncertain, and the anxiety which she fancied she could read in the eyes of her friend the Principessa seemed to be growing in degree, although it still remained without an explanation.

But what occupied her mind most were the disputes about the state of the world in general which had now become a standing arrangement between Lieutenant Roccatelli and herself. Her ideas of the word “Socialist,” which hitherto had dimly represented to her a blood-stained individual with a firebrand in one hand and a dripping dagger in the other, had come to be considerably modified. By degrees she had even begun to recognise that, under all these cloudy dreams, there yet lay buried a kernel of truth. Against the unpractical nature of the dreams her common sense rebelled, while yet her instinct told her that the dreamer himself was sincere, and that if he deceived any

one it was himself. Some of the things he said took an obstinate hold of her memory. Thus one day he asserted that poverty had been invented by men and not by God.

"The world itself proves it," he said, "since it produces food enough for all its inhabitants—enough fruit to be gathered, enough beasts to be killed. God has given enough, but man has divided it unfairly."

Annie reflected, and the deduction pleased her as being perfectly logical. She had always had a liking for sound logic, as the prizes earned at school could testify. She reflected further yet, and the comfortable satisfaction about things in general in which she had hitherto indulged began to give way to a keener sympathy with those less lucky than herself. The selfishness of well-fed and well-cared-for youth is an innocent instinct which has nothing in common with the hard egoism of experience. It did not lie in Miss Bellew's plan of education to awaken whatever possibilities of compassion might lie locked away within her pupils' souls. Her experience had taught her that parents are not invariably pleased when their daughters come home with their heads brimful of extravagantly philanthropical ideas. Of course Annie had known that there were hungry people in the world, but hitherto she had simply accepted them as facts, something that was as unavoidable as rain in summer or ice in winter. It was Luigi who first opened her eyes in this matter.

Although neither he nor she knew it, yet these two natures seemed to have been created in order to complete each other. Her healthy common sense and his exaggeratedly idealistic tendencies corrected each other mutually. They had begun by being startled by each other, as was indeed unavoidable, and it was the man who had got over the surprise much more quickly than the woman; not only because in this case it was the man's nature that was the more

adaptive of the two, but also because he had loved from the first. The deliberate answers which had begun by making him impatient very soon appeared to him to be refreshing and restful. He had come to understand that they went together with the honest brown eyes; that they were a bit of herself; that it could not be otherwise, and that neither did he wish it otherwise.

Now and then he even admitted her arguments. It was at her advice that he abandoned one of his plans for the amelioration of the world. Though he was barely twenty-three, yet in the lumber-room of his mind there already lay stored a whole heap of these broken-up plans, which had in turn been hotly taken up, eagerly examined, and then regretfully dropped, having been found wanting. Sometimes he would come to her with a panacea for all ills, invented over-night. This time it had been the outline sketch of a model community to be founded somewhere on the other side of the ocean—he was not particular about the locality—and to be conducted under his personal supervision. He did not mean to begin with more than five hundred members—subjects, he had almost said.

"Then," he argued, "there would at least be five hundred happy people in the world."

"No one can know that," said Annie; "but what I do know for certain is that there would be one unhappy person. Do you not see that with these wild undertakings you would be breaking your mother's heart, and the heart of any one else who loved you?"

"No one loves me but my mother," he said, with sudden despondency.

"But why look so far away, so far ahead? I fancy there must be ways of making the people close to one happy."

"Yes; but for that one needs money. With money one could begin bettering the world, even without a revolution;

but without money what else can one do but scream until one gets a hearing? Tell me, how would you begin to make people happy if you had a great deal of money?"

Annie stared at him, half suspecting a joke, but in the same instant she remembered that of course Prince Roccatelli was as ignorant of her father's enormous wealth as any other of the visitors at Lancegno, and she began to explain a little hurriedly how she thought that money would be best employed.

Not long after this talk had come that day which to Annie remained ever memorable. It was not much that had happened, as far as outward events were concerned.

Annie was once more practising her songs, as she had regularly continued to do. Again it was a little before the dinner-bell, and again Lieutenant Roccatelli had come in while she was singing, just as he had done upon that first day. Mrs. Brand sat in the background, perfectly passive, as was her habit.

"These are only exercises," Annie was saying, "but I have been practising that song lately which you took such trouble to explain to me, quite at the beginning of our acquaintance—don't you remember? Here it is. I will sing it now, and please be so kind as to tell me if it is better this way."

She began the air from the "Nozze di Figaro," singing with far more confidence than formerly, for she felt certain that she had greatly improved. When she came to the passage, "Non trovo pace notte ne dì, e pur mi piacè languir così," she could scarcely refrain from smiling to herself in anticipation of his approval. But when the last chord was struck no word of approval came. Annie looked up, surprised and somewhat hurt, and met Lieutenant Roccatelli's eyes fixed upon her face with a wild, devouring

glance which she had never before seen. He was leaning forward with his folded arms upon the piano, and his face was a shade paler than usual.

She looked away in sudden bewilderment, and began turning over the pages of her music.

"Was it right this time?" she asked, feeling aware that something had to be said.

"Yes, it was right," answered Luigi, speaking like a person whose thoughts are far away.

"Were there any mistakes?"

"There were no mistakes—— Yes, it is exactly so."

He did not stay long after that, and Annie was glad that he went. She felt a great wish to be alone. The dinner-bell had not yet rung—of that also she was glad. Outside in the garden she sat down upon the first bench she came to, and now only she became aware that she was trembling. She remembered now that this trembling had begun at the very moment when she met Lieutenant Roccatelli's eyes. Several minutes passed, but the beating of her heart was not yet stilled. "What can it mean?" she still asked herself; but already she had guessed one half of the truth. Even to her inexperience that look in those eyes could only mean one thing. He loved her, then—a man actually loved her to this extent. She had supposed, indeed, that some man would love her some day; but she had never looked upon this as an immediate contingency. There could be no hurry about that, surely, since she had scarcely yet become used to looking upon herself as fully grown up.

And now the accomplished thing had surprised her without any preparation. This man loved her—now that she came to think of it, she even considered it probable that he had loved her for some time past. Perhaps he even had hopes; and if so, it could not be right to go on

meeting him as she had met him hitherto—it must surely be unfair towards him—unless, indeed—unless——

And here the nervous trembling which had nearly laid itself began again anew. Her most pressing *désire* just now was for perfect clearness. At school she had been taught always to know exactly why she acted in any particular way, with what object she followed any particular course. “Your thoughts should be kept as tidy as your drawers,” had been one of Miss Bellew’s favourite sayings. They were very far from being as tidy to-day, Annie recognised with confusion.

Would it be right to go on meeting Prince Roccattelli? She put the question to herself and waited deliberately for an answer, but instead of any answer there only came an unexpected sense of disappointment at the idea of not seeing him again. That need not mean anything more than habit, to be sure. It had become so much a matter of course to meet Lieutenant Roccattelli everywhere, that it had never before occurred to her to wonder what the Cursalon, or the stone pavilion in the Monastero garden, or Lancegno itself, or indeed the whole world, would be like without him.

These nervous sensations were extremely annoying. How was it possible to think logically or consecutively, or to disentangle cause and effect, when her heart was beating in her ears and her breath coming so ridiculously short? There was something else too in her surroundings which disturbed her vaguely, without her being able at once to trace the disturbance to its source. At last it flashed upon her that it was some scent in the air, and she noticed that she was sitting close to a large bed of *mignonette*. *Mignonette* was the flower which she never could quite separate from the memory of her last months at Cumberley. Those early, undefined emotions, those shapeless yearnings which

had been so apt to stir under the influence of summer evenings or moonlit nights, had always seemed to be penetrated by this particular scent. At this moment it all came back to her with a rush of remembrance that was almost irresistible. Was she beginning to understand at last? Could that have been the desire, and was this the accomplishment, or was it only that the overpowering sweetness of the perfume was going to her head?

It was no use. One thing only was quite clear—viz., that nothing was clear. It was certain, at any rate, that she must meet Lieutenant Roccattelli once more, in order to put her own feelings to the test. Very likely it was only the novelty of the whole thing which disturbed her so greatly; by the next meeting she would have had time to collect herself, and would no doubt be able to dissect her own sensations to her own satisfaction. If necessary, it should be a final meeting.

And as she came to this conclusion the dinner-bell began to clang out its summons.

Mr. Brand did not appear at the *table d'hôte* that evening. A note which the ragged goat-herd had brought him late in the afternoon had summoned him to the Monastero. At the moment that Annie and her mother were taking their places at table he was still sitting opposite to the Principessa, and quite forgetful of his dinner.

Her beautiful face was not so perfectly calm as usual, and her hands played uneasily with her fan.

"It is not that I have any anxiety for the result," she explained, "but only that that result is so long in coming. Everything goes smoothly, but it goes at a snail's pace. I do not think the girl can escape in the end, but she is much longer in catching fire than I had calculated. *Santa Madonna!*" she exclaimed with a sudden delightful petulance, "how slow you English are in everything!"

"Well, my plan would have been quicker," said Mr. Brand with a certain grim satisfaction. "We haven't got much more than a fortnight now, you know, until the 15th of September."

The Principessa did not answer immediately. It was not of the 15th of September that she was thinking just now, but of the 31st of August, and this was the 24th.

"Something must be done," she said after a long pause. "It would be too great a risk to run matters so close. That is why I sent for you to-day. Nature has shown herself too slow; it is an artificial touch that is now required. There might be various plans, but I have decided for an excursion in the mountains. It is an ancient device, but it rarely fails, what with the opportunities it creates and the effect on the imagination. I have also settled upon the spot. The excursion will have to be made to the Castello."

"What is that?" asked Mr. Brand, a trifle sulkily.

"It is the ruins of what used to be the original seat of the Roccattelli family. I once showed your daughter a drawing I had made of it. It stands some distance from here, deeper in the mountains. It is a favourite spot for excursions. Nothing can appear more natural than your visiting it, more particularly in this perfect weather."

"There will be a lot of bad walking, I suppose. If it's only a question of eating one's food out of doors, can't we go to some place that's closer at hand?"

"No, you cannot." The Principessa was now holding her head at a particular angle which Mr. Brand knew, and which somehow always made him feel small. "I have not chosen the Castello at random. I know quite well what I expect of it; it is something more than the mere effect of the scenery—something quite definite and distinct. For me it solves a difficulty which I have long been puzzling over. I will explain. Lately I have told myself that one of the reasons

why the sweet Annetta is so slow in catching fire may well lie therein, that hitherto she has seen of Luigi nothing more than what one sees of a man in a drawing-room. He has never done before her eyes anything that any weakling might not have done. Now, it lies deep in the law of human nature that physical qualities will always bear an incalculable weight in female eyes. I do not know if you follow me. My wish is to place Luigi before your daughter in a light in which she hitherto has not thought of him. The matter is really very simple. On the tower of the ruined Castello there grows some wonderful rose-coloured moss: this particular sort is not to be found far and wide in the mountains. Tradition says that some Roccатели brought the seed from Palestine in the time of the Crusades. The Crusades are responsible for a good many foolish stories, you know. Be this as it may, the moss grows in great tufts upon the top of the tower. It requires a very steady head as well as foot in order to reach it. Even by the shepherds the climbing of that tower is considered a feat. Very well; Luigi shall gather that moss for Annetta—that is my whole plan. It is not much, you will say, but possibly it may be enough. No doubt it would be better still if he could save a child from drowning before her eyes, or catch a runaway horse, as they do in the story-books, but we cannot afford such luxuries as that—we have to be content with the moss. Luigi has often been on that tower before. Of course, for any person who happens not to be giddy it is really no feat at all—just about as heroic as it would be for a cat to go out walking on a roof; not a question of valour at all, but only of the proportion of iron and phosphorus in the blood; but girls always remain girls. I believe it will throw quite a quantity of dust in her eyes. Not only will she tremble for his safety—which in itself is an excellent move—but also it will be the exact antidote to the shock she experienced when she saw him

kneel at my feet like a child. I hope that it may bring about the crisis. The excursion must not be later than the day after to-morrow. You have to-morrow for making your arrangements and inviting your party, for of course there must be other people there to give a *contenance* to the whole thing—not too many; perhaps eight or ten altogether. Luigi shall order the mules and the guides. I will send him over to-morrow.”

When Mr. Brand was gone, the Principessa got up and walked to the window. Her anxious eyes scanned all she could see of the sunset sky. She was asking herself whether the weather would hold for two days more. That would be till Wednesday—and Sunday was the 31st. It was very close. Could Luigi have forgotten? He had not spoken of the subject for two weeks now. Ah, well; no doubt he was too happy in the present to remember that there was a future. But for her it would not do to forget.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE NEW PATIENT.

ON the morning of August 27 the sunshine poured in one single broad flood into Dr. Wagner's consulting-room, which lay straight to the right of the Curhaus entrance. The doctor and one patient were present. An examination had just taken place; the patient sat upon the broad leather sofa, leisurely buttoning up his blue uniform coat, while the doctor stood a little apart, thoughtfully wiping his spectacles and throwing keen and somewhat curious glances towards the lieutenant on the sofa.

Ten minutes ago, while reading his newspaper, Dr. Wagner had been interrupted by the entrance of a patient whom he did not know by sight. Lately he had had a good deal of leisure for his newspaper, for the end of August means the approach of the end of the season for Lancingno. In a few weeks more the bath-room pipes will have ceased to bubble, linen covers will have been spread over the velvet seats of the Cursalon, and the doctor himself will have rejoined his family in Vienna.

The new patient had come, as he explained, not so much in the character of a patient as in hopes of killing the time of his three weeks' leave pleasantly. Since there were baths here, of course he would bathe; particularly as Dr. Vogl had always told him that iron was what he wanted. He had no objection to drinking the water either, if Dr. Wagner should think it desirable.

"Is that the same Vogl who used to be attached to the 53rd Infantry Regiment in Vienna?" inquired the doctor.

"Yes, the same."

"A small, sleepy man who generally lives in a dressing-gown?"

"Exactly—that is he."

"And no other doctor has treated you?"

"No. I never was actually ill, you know."

"Did Dr. Vogl ever examine you?"

"Dear old Vogl! No; I don't think that ever occurred to him."

"And he says you require iron?"

"Iron or steel, or whatever it is that makes blood. Dear doctor, you're not going to put me through a catechism, are you? I didn't come here to be taken so seriously as all that, you know. Tell me when I'm to begin my baths, and I'll leave you in peace directly."

The doctor took another long look at his patient.

"My advice would be not to begin them at all."

"What on earth do you mean?"

"Well, you see, it is rather late in the season for the commencement of a course of baths," said the doctor, polishing away with renewed vigour at his spectacles and thereby evading the lieutenant's inquiring gaze. "And, furthermore, I must tell you that I do not agree with Dr. Vogl about the iron. These waters are very strong—not by any means suited to every constitution. In my opinion it is not a stimulant that you require—rather the reverse. I will give you a recipe for some drops to be taken at night; but do not touch the waters. My advice to you is to pack up and to return the way you came."

At the concluding words Dr. Wagner looked up, half afraid of having been too plain, but the expression he met was one of quite superficial and almost comical dismay.

"My dearest doctor! Do you know what you are saying? Where, in the name of all that's wonderful, do you suppose that I'm to get my travelling-money from in such a hurry? Besides, I've had enough and to spare of railways for a couple of days at least. Bother the iron in Heaven's name, but for goodness' sake don't turn me out before I've taken a look around me."

He had risen from the sofa and approached the window where the doctor was standing, but it was not for the doctor's sake alone that he came. For the last few minutes his attention had been aroused by a muffled jingling just outside the window, mingled with stamping hoofs and an occasional Italian oath. Peering over the window-blind, he could just catch sight of a small group of mules, some of which were saddled with side-saddles, while another was being laden with divers packages and with a most promising-looking hamper. The lieutenant's eyes lit up on the instant. All this looked remarkably like a pleasant picnic party. And side-saddles too!

"Catch me going again until I've taken a nearer look at my fellow-patients," was his inward reflection. "I wonder what that old owl takes me for!"

When, a few minutes later, he was leaving the room, holding between his fingers the prescription for the drops that were to be taken at night, Dr. Wagner's voice called him back, almost at the door.

"One moment more," said the doctor quickly, like a person who has remembered something, and following him to the door. "I think it is my duty—that is to say, I am of opinion that you will do well to avoid anything in the shape not only of physical exertion but also of mental excitement—more particularly mental excitement, there lies the danger—the results might be very injurious."

The patient stood with his fingers on the door-handle,

staring hard at the doctor, his attention aroused at last. Something like genuine alarm began to dawn upon his face. He was about to frame a question, but at that very moment one of the mules outside shook its bell-harness with so musical a jingle that to the lieutenant's ears it sounded almost like an invitation. That settled the question. He could not waste more time here. He had even forgotten what it was that he had meant to ask.

"My dear doctor, you don't know whom you are talking to. I am far too wise ever to get into the way of mental excitement—shouldn't even know how to set about it! Make your mind easy on that score!"

He was out of the door before he had done speaking, still laughing with engaging impertinence into Dr. Wagner's grave face.

A singularly correct instinct, which rarely failed him on such occasions, drew his steps towards the open space in front of the Curhaus, where the saddled mules, tormented by flies, were incessantly whisking their long tails, and had already stamped the fine gravel of the terrace into a hopeless chaos. Among the men who were still busy with the packages, an officer in uniform stood with his back turned towards the building. At sight of that long, blue back the face of the newly-arrived patient became radiant. He went straight up and laid his hand upon the other's shoulder.

"Well, Roccatelli, if this isn't luck I don't know what is! And just as I was asking myself whence I was to procure a mentor and guide in this unexplored country. You know everybody, of course; now all you've got to do, like a good fellow as you are, is to introduce me to every pretty woman in the place."

"That's asking a good deal, Bernegg," said Luigi, looking at his comrade with a certain absence of surprise and

interest which seemed to indicate that his mind was fully occupied already.

"Is it? I'm delighted to hear it. Nothing could sound more promising. Under these circumstances, the sooner you set about it the better. Now, there's a rather neat head of golden hair over there—is she one of your friends?"

"The daughter of a Vienna Professor—yes, I can introduce you to her on the spot, if you like."

"Wait a minute. That pair of sisters that is just coming out of the door is almost better."

"The Fräuleins Kruger. They are of our party to-day."

"Not bad of their kind, though I'm not quite sure whether it's them or their clothes that I like. I trust that you've got something better in the background than what I've seen as yet. The Fräuleins Kruger do well enough at a pinch, but have you got no real *belles* here? A watering-place without a *belle* is an absurdity."

"There is Madame Folgarde," said Luigi, a little doubtfully. "She's very pretty in the French style. Everybody raves about her hands and feet; and there is also the Countess Melizzi, a big blonde, who is considered very interesting."

"And nobody else?"

"N—no," said Luigi, turning over some gravel with the point of his boot. "That is to say, of course there are several pretty faces; but it is so difficult to say, tastes are so different, you know. But I can't stop longer, Bernegg; I must look after these animals. We'll meet again to-night, I suppose."

"I suppose so," said Bernegg, resignedly, and, with another wistful look at the mules, he sauntered off, though not far, for he was determined at least to see the start.

The party was almost assembled, and one or two of the

ladies were settling their skirts upon the mules' backs, when Luigi again felt a hand upon his shoulder, and again turned round to find Bernegg behind him. This time the other's face was transformed.

"You rogue!" he said between his teeth, laughing softly to himself, while his half-closed eyes gleamed with fun. "Commend me to an Italian for sincerity. What does the wretch do but give me a list of all the mediocre beauties, while he keeps the real *belle* safely in the background. Quite ready, was he, to introduce me to the Professor's daughter on the spot? Quickest recipe for getting me out of the way, no doubt. Ah, *coquin*! Who is she, I beg of you—and upon the honour of an Austrian officer, mind you speak the truth this time!"

"She is an English lady," said Luigi, a little coldly. It never even occurred to him to ask who it was that Bernegg meant. "Let me go, please; they are almost ready."

The other was still holding him by the sleeve.

"Wait a minute," he said, with the air of a man who has irrevocably made up his mind. "I don't think I can let you go without me after this. It wouldn't be fair upon me. Look here—you seem to be the *arrangeur* of this party—is there any reason why you should not give me an invitation at the last moment? Comrade arrived overnight—best possible opportunity for making acquaintance with scenery—surely it's as easy as possible and quite *comme il faut*."

"It is not my party," replied Luigi, impatiently; "it is Mr. Brand's party. There, Frau von Kruger is calling me; I tell you that I am wanted."

Frau von Kruger, who, as the stoutest member of the party, had been securely installed upon the broadest-backed mule and had at last got her skirts to lie to her satisfaction, received Prince Roccattelli with apologetic smiles.

"My dear Prince, this looks very rude, but please do not for one moment think that I meant to interrupt your conversation with your friend. He *is* your friend, is he not?"

"He belongs to my regiment," said Luigi, shortly.

"So, so; a comrade, and evidently a very elegant young man," and Frau von Kruger threw a critical glance towards the stranger. "No doubt you have a great deal to say to each other. I would not dream of interrupting you. What I meant, on the contrary, to suggest just now was that your friend, if he is so inclined, should accompany us, so as to enable you to continue your conversation undisturbed. I am sure Mr. Brand will have no objection; we are rather short of gentlemen as it is."

Mr. Brand had no objection, which necessarily made it impossible for Luigi to have any. Within five minutes a general introduction had taken place and the party was in motion. It had been rather a lucky chance, Frau von Kruger reflected, as she dug her heel into the side of her phlegmatic mule. The idea of one of her daughters being short of a cavalier had not suited her maternal vanity, and yet, but for this chance, it would have been almost unavoidable; for besides Prince Roccатели, whose attentions were known to be already engaged, the only young man whom Mr. Brand had invited was a small, stout youth generally known by the name of the "Bajazzo." This young man was a standing feature of the place, and evidently considered himself bound to provide for the nightly entertainment of the visitors. Some such individual is to be found at most watering-places. Herr Plenn was for ever coming to the front with some novel means of dispelling any cloud of *ennui* which threatened to descend upon the Curhaus. One evening it had been some donkeys returning from pasture that had furnished him with the opportunity he

wanted. To hail them in as grotesque a fashion as possible, rush after them, leap upon one of their backs, kick the beast into a gallop, and then to slide down over its tail amid frantic applause, had been for Herr Plenn the work of a couple of minutes; and so neatly did he come one cropper after the other that it was almost possible to take them all for genuine. On the following evening the loungers on the verandah had perceived that in the Cursalon there was some joke going on in which some sofa-cushions and a walking-stick played the chief rôles, not, indeed, quite intelligible to the outsiders, but evidently vastly funny, to judge from the hilarity of the insiders. During the day-time the "Bajazzo" was rarely visible—busied, no doubt, in studying the joke for the evening. It was difficult to get rid of the idea that Herr Plenn was regularly paid for keeping up the spirits of the patients, so as to earn for Lancegno the reputation of cheerfulness and gaiety, or that at the very least he got both board and lodging free of cost. Some people asserted that the poor "Bajazzo" spent the day-hours stretched on a sofa with cold compresses round his head, recovering from yesterday's exertions and preparing for to-day's.

The Fräuleins Kruger, who, together with Annie Brand, formed the maiden trio of the party, were a pair of harmless blondes, always dressed to perfection. The luck of each consisted in having a sister, as Frau von Kruger, whose maternal wisdom surpassed even her vanity, was perfectly aware. Not the tiniest difference even in a sash or a pair of gloves was allowed between the two, and if Mimi had toothache Lili had to keep her sister company instead of dining at the *table d'hôte*. Frau von Kruger knew very well that duplicates are always more effective than solitary facts, unless the fact be an unusually striking one, and that a pair of scarlet jackets or a couple of blue

bows produces not double the effect, but fifty times the effect of the single article. Her friends laughed at her especial crank; they found both girls pretty. But the wise mother saw clearer. Her one anxiety was to marry off both her daughters at once, for she could not help knowing that on the very morrow of Lili's or Mimi's wedding-day the world would to its surprise discover that Mimi or Lili—whichever the case might be—was entirely insignificant.

The one other member of the party not yet mentioned was a fussy old gentleman with a white moustache *à la Victor Emmanuel*, who kept giving to the company a succession of nervous starts by making such sudden exclamations as, "Where are the umbrellas?" or, "I do believe we've left the shawls behind us!" When, after an agonised search, both umbrellas and shawls had been brought to light, Signor Molinetti would settle down into a deceitful calm, which three minutes later would be interrupted by a spasmodic inquiry as to whether any one had thought of bringing a corkscrew and salt for the hard-boiled eggs.

The way first led across the valley, upon that stony path which Annie knew so well, and then, leaving the Monastery to the left, entered into the deeper shadows of the hills. The day was perfect, but it was no longer a summer's day; the first stealthy footsteps of autumn were visible upon the discoloured grass, her first blood-red finger-marks upon the glowing vineyards. Solitary pale yellow patches appeared among the chestnut and walnut branches. Even the butterflies and the midges that sailed across the path were no longer quite the same that had been noticed a week ago. They belonged to another season.

Annie was glad of the stillness of the day, and glad also of its clearness. It would be easier to think calmly and clearly amid so peaceful a scene. She was quite certain that to-day was an important day for her, since she had resolved

before evening to find an answer to that question which had been pressing upon her mind all yesterday. She had not exaggerated her sentiments when she once told Luigi that in her opinion it was dishonest not to do entirely what one is doing, and she was quite prepared to apply the principle to herself. If to-day brought her the conviction that Prince Roccatelli was no more to her than a pleasant acquaintance or even a friend, then, in fairness to himself, she must avoid meeting him during what remained of her stay at Lancegno. Before evening there would be plenty of opportunities for putting herself to the test—so, at least, she had calculated; but, as soon appeared, her reckonings had been made without one circumstance, and this circumstance was Bernegg.

From the very outset she had been surprised to find this new lieutenant by her side, instead of Prince Roccatelli. He talked a good deal in his fluent French while they were crossing the valley, and talked pleasantly enough too; but the conversation was not of the sort to which she had become accustomed lately. Oddly enough, she missed the gestures and the manner of laying stress on certain words—talking “in italics” as she herself had called it at first—and to which she had grown so used that other talk seemed colourless beside it—wanting in light and shadow, in life and vigour. She could not help turning her head from time to time in order to see where the other gentlemen of the party were. When the rocky gorge was entered which led to the goal of the excursion, matters had not yet changed. At the very moment that the path turned abruptly, leaving the sunshine behind, the chill of the mountain-side fell upon the party almost with a shock, and it seemed as though this chill were mental as well as physical, for Annie was not the only member of the company dissatisfied with the present distribution. This could be guessed at by Mr. Brand’s perplexed face, as well as by the unnecessary energy with which Frau von

Kruger was digging her heel into the side of her patient mule. It was not for this that she had helped that young man to an invitation. The Bajazzo was doing his best, poor fellow, but even a Bajazzo could not manage both Lili and Mimi at once, more especially on so narrow a path; and as for Prince Roccattelli, he was simply not to be counted. Since the beginning he had ridden at the back, a silent and somewhat sullen-looking rearguard, who had as yet spoken only when directly addressed.

It was beginning to be rather a bore, Annie thought, but, after all, there would still be time enough before evening. When once they were off this path the party would mingle more freely.

But would they ever get off this path? With every step the rocks, straight and naked as the walls of a fortress, seemed to be closing in, as though they would cut off all advance. It was not hard to imagine that the blocks of stone that lay here and there on the ever-steepening path had been rolled down upon the heads of assailants. Of vegetation only a starved grass-tuft now and then clinging to the rock, and of sky only a narrow strip of blue far overhead. And always chillier, always narrower, always darker—where could this end? Surely only in a dungeon. Annie was saying it to herself when the path went round another corner and a burst of sunshine dazzled her eyes.

There, deep in the hills, on an island of verdure isolated in the midst of the barren tracts all around, stood the ruins of the ancient seat of the Roccattellis. Some dozen broad-foliaged trees, chestnuts and sycamores, all over a century old and all sprung up since the last slate on the roof of the Castello fell, were dotted over the grass space, giving it a park-like appearance which in its best days it had probably not possessed. Two round towers, of which one had crumbled to half its height, connected by a fragment of a wall, were

all that remained of the former stronghold, and yet in the brilliant light of to-day the scene was well-nigh festive. Breeze and sunbeams had breathed life into the ruin. The fiery trails of the wild vine waved like pennons from the wall; from the crumbling gateway beckoning arms seemed to be moving; a long tuft of bleached mountain-grass floated from the tower like the veil of an imprisoned maiden, and the scarlet leaves that climbed about the window-sockets gleamed like newly-spilled wine—or was it newly-shed blood? There it lay basking in the sunshine, this grinning nodding, spectre of the past, staring before it with its empty eyes, and dreaming in imbecile delight of that which had been and could never be again.

CHAPTER XV.

THE ROSE-COLOURED MOSS.

"WHO will ever know how many lances have been broken on this spot?" said Lieutenant Bernegg to Annie Brand.

It was two hours later. Luncheon had been dawdled over under the shade of a giant chestnut and the superintendence of Signor Molinetti, who had begun by insisting on making elaborate arrangements for the comfort of everybody, in the course of which he managed to make everybody thoroughly uncomfortable. Now both bottles and baskets were well-nigh empty, and the elder members of the party did not look disinclined to follow the example of the muleteers over there, who were already taking their *siesta* with their hats over their eyes. It would not be very long before the baskets would have to be packed up again, for the days were shorter than they used to be; but meanwhile the gentle jingle of the bell-harness and even the monotonous whisking of the mules' tails spread a sense of pleasant dreaminess over the party. Mimi and Lili Kruger, reposing on the grass in their pink-flowered cottons and their broad-brimmed straw hats, looked like a pair of Dresden china statuettes issued from the same workshop.

"Why should lances be broken?" asked Annie in answer to Bernegg's remark, and not exactly thinking of what she was saying.

She had been startled by the discovery made during the

last half-hour that she was beginning to hate Lieutenant Bernegg. At this rate she would reach home again with the question still unanswered, for it was quite evident that Prince Roccatelli had decided to remain passive. Except when directly taken in hand by Frau von Kruger or Signor Molinetti, he had spent the last two hours in a disdainful silence which somehow disquieted Annie.

“Why should lances be broken?”

“Why, except that women are beautiful? There never was any other valid reason. We do not break lances nowadays, but if you want to know my real opinion, I do not believe that women were as beautiful then as they are now.”

He lowered his voice by just one shade as he said it. It was a way he had, and which was apt to give to his most commonplace remarks the air of a confidential communication. To this and to his perfect command over his eyes he owed most of his triumphs. It is not everyone who has the power to put his soul into his eyes at a moment's notice—that is to say, exactly as much of his soul as he deems desirable for the occasion.

“Why do you not believe so?” asked Annie, still without a shade of interest.

“Is it *you* who ask me that?” said Bernegg with well-feigned surprise, looking straight into her eyes and speaking almost in a whisper.

Now, at last, she would surely blush, he said to himself. There must be limits even to this British stolidity. During the whole of the earlier part of the day he had sought for these limits in vain, strewing gracefully veiled compliments broadcast with that airy and yet so nicely-calculated impudence which sat so well upon him. But all he had gained as yet by this expenditure of *petites niaiseries*, as he loved to term them, was an occasional perplexed stare from out of

the great serious child's eyes—a stare which was to him so new of its kind that, curious to relate, it even perplexed him a little.

But this time she must surely understand, and he had scarcely spoken when he saw that she had understood. The wave of angry colour that mounted to her face was so vivid that, quite contrary to his habit, Lieutenant Bernegg took fright. Was it possible that under the influence of those dreamily jingling bells, or of the South Tyrolese wine that had figured at luncheon, or of that face before him, or of all together, he had actually put a shade too much soul into his eyes? The thing was unprecedented, but not impossible.

“It cannot surely be,” he said to himself, and smiled at his own alarm; “it cannot be that for me, too, the time has come for losing my head. Bah! it is only a fancy.”

“Roccatelli!” he cried in a new tone of animation as he turned from his companion, “I do believe you’re asleep! Why, who is to do the honours of the home of your ancestors if not yourself? Come, like a good fellow, and introduce us to the ghosts inside.”

Annie looked with relief towards Luigi. Surely now this long strain must come to an end.

“There is nothing to be seen inside,” said Luigi, without changing his position on the grass.

“Oh, yes, there is!” cried Herr Plenn, leaping to his feet with the agility of a clown, for the Bajazzo could be either very nimble or very unwieldy, according as it suited his momentary ends. “Why, the place is thickly peopled with Roccatellis—bodiless ones, of course—and I’m on speaking terms with them all. Let the poor Prince take a *siesta* in peace; I’m quite ready to represent him, and able too, I should say. Who knows whether I won’t pass for a Roccatelli myself? I’ve got about the same figure as the

Prince, have I not?" finished Herr Plenn, making himself as broad and short as he could.

Mimi and Lili found the joke so exquisite that both of them were forced to take out their delicate, pink-bordered handkerchiefs, for fear of choking, and even Signor Molinetti's white moustache quivered slightly.

"Besides," went on the Bajazzo, "nobody ever comes back from the Castello without bringing home some of the celebrated red moss. Why, they won't even believe that we've been here unless we have something to show for it. It's always the nimblest member of the party who climbs the tower; and, talking of figures, I'm sure the company will agree that I'm the right fellow for the job."

"But it looks dangerous," said Frau von Kruger, suddenly awaking from a nap. "Better send one of the muleteers."

"And leave the laurels to them? Not while I have breath!" And Herr Plenn began to race for the ruin. He had been here often enough to know exactly where he would find the most convenient foothold, for the empty shell of the high tower was unapproachable except by the wall. Within one minute he had swung himself on to the top of the wall, had stumbled along a few paces with as elephantine a gait as he could command, and in the next already was sprawling helplessly on the grass, to the intense delight of the Fräuleins Kruger. He had often done the trick before, but never quite as neatly as to-day.

"Shall I try next?" asked Lieutenant Bernegg of Annie Brand.

She turned to him with the brightest smile he had seen to-day.

"*Please* do," she said with unusual emphasis. "I should so like to bring mother home some of the rose-coloured moss."

It had struck her that this was the best opportunity for getting rid of her inconvenient cavalier, for at least a space of time.

Bernegg gained the top of the wall ever so much more gracefully than Herr Plenn had done, but he did not get so far as the crumbled-down bit which the Bajazzo had selected for his tumble. He did not tumble either, but to the astonishment of the company, he suddenly faced round, and somewhat uncertainly retraced the few steps he had made. When he had been helped to the ground he stood for a few seconds with his back to the wall, looking rather white and breathing rather hard, but smiling pleasantly all the time.

"A piece of nonsense," he said when he had recovered breath; "only a piece of nonsense. I might have known it. I'm ridiculously giddy; never could stand even on the top of a wine-barrel. Only want of blood, you know; but I'll try again."

"That you certainly will not," said Signor Molinetti, seizing him by the arm and dragging him back towards the chestnut tree.

"It's quite clear that we are not to have our rose-coloured moss to-day," said Lili Kruger with the shadow of a pout.

At that moment Luigi got up from the grass and walked leisurely towards the ruin. He had shown no interest whatever in the proceedings of the last minutes. He had almost reached the wall before Frau von Kruger noticed him.

"My dear Prince," she called after him in piercing accents, "don't go, I entreat of you. It is evident that Fate is against us, and it looks just awfully dangerous. What is that man saying?"

"He is saying," replied Signor Molinetti, turning from

one of the muleteers, "that the last rains have loosened a good many of the stones on the top of the wall. It is not as safe as it used to be."

"Do you hear that? Prince, my dear Prince, come back again!"

"Yes, please come back again!" said Annie abruptly.

Luigi stood still and turned round. "But it was you who wanted the moss," he replied, looking straight at Annie. "You said so just now." It was almost the first time that he had directly addressed her that day.

"Not if it is dangerous," she said, reddening. "I would rather do without it."

"It isn't a bit dangerous; I have often been on the tower before." And he turned, and having kicked off his light summer shoes began to climb the wall.

"But the rains," shrieked Signor Molinetti, dancing with excitement. "The muleteer—the loose stones!"

Luigi appeared not to have heard. He was on the top of the wall already, and feeling his way with his stockinged feet among the loose stones. By the time he reached the tower all the words of warning had ceased. Even Signor Molinetti felt that the less the climber's attention was distracted the better it would be for him. From where the spectators were grouped there appeared to be next to no foothold on the walls of the tower, but for Luigi, who knew every square yard of the surface by heart, who had over and over again calculated the distances between the loopholes, and who knew to which of the buttresses he could trust and to which not, the ascent of the tower had long been reduced to an exact science. Annie watched him with a fast-beating heart as he clung like a cat to the walls, gliding and grasping and twisting his way rapidly and yet cautiously on to the top of the ruined battlements.

The descent was slower than the ascent, being the more

dangerous of the two. It was only when his feet had again touched the top of the wall that Annie realised how frightened she had been. The strain of attention relaxed immediately, and the rest of the company began to talk again. To one who had climbed the tower what remained to do must be mere child's play. They had not said more than a few words, when suddenly Herr Plenn uttered an exclamation and ran forward. Everyone looked round, startled, and saw Prince Roccatelli lying at his full length on the grass, while two large stones, loosened by the fall, were still slowly rolling down the slope. It was almost the same spot on which the Bajazzo had been sprawling a short time ago; but Luigi was not sprawling—he lay stretched out with his face upon the grass, and made no movement as though to rise. Just in the first minute the possibility of this too being a trick flashed through several minds, and Mimi Kruger even began to laugh. It was the Bajazzo who first guessed the truth. He was too good an actor himself not to recognise the genuine thing when he saw it.

Signor Molinetti was the second to reach the spot.

"*Aqua!*" he shrieked, when with the help of Herr Plenn he had laid Luigi upon his back. "Tell some of those fellows to bring water!"

The whole party had drawn near.

"He is dead," said some one in almost too quiet a voice.

It was Annie who had spoken, though she was not aware of having said anything. The pink-bordered handkerchiefs had again come to the front, for Lili and Mimi had begun to cry without exactly knowing why. Annie was not thinking of crying; she knew that tears in her eyes would have dimmed her sight, and she was watching with every nerve for a movement of life upon that white face on the grass.

"No, he is not dead," said Herr Plenn about a minute after she had spoken.

"Water!" reiterated Signor Molinetti, unable not to enjoy having something to fuss over. "Are those fellows made of wood? You're not holding his head high enough. I don't understand a bit how it happened—at the very easiest spot too. He isn't bleeding, is he? Signor Brand, have you got a handkerchief? *Corpo di Baccho!* and those stones too! Water! Why aren't they bringing water?"

They had not yet brought the water when Luigi's lips began to move, and he sleepily opened his eyes. The fall had indeed stunned him completely, but not for long. The first feeling of panic began to disperse. The Fräuleins Kruger, who had been led into the background by their prudent mother, proceeded to dry their eyes. Nobody had thought of leading Annie away; she still stood on the same spot waiting for what might be coming.

A few minutes later they began to help him to his feet. He had declared impatiently that he was quite able to stand, but the moment that he planted his left foot upon the ground his face contracted, and but for Mr. Brand's arm he would have fallen again. It was evident that either the foot or the ankle had been injured, probably by one of the loosened stones. It was also evident that he was still far too dazed to be able even to sit on a mule's back.

Consultations, proposals, disputes, followed. Half an hour passed before the party set out, somewhat silent and subdued, while at the rear, in an improvised hammock of plaids, invented by Signor Molinetti, two of the muleteers carried the injured man.

As they issued from the long stony gorge the glimpse of the green valley below met them like a deliverance. They were close to the Monastero now.

"I'm going in there," said Mr. Brand, turning to Frau von Kruger. "Somebody must go in, and I know the Principessa. You'll take care of Annie on the way home, won't you?"

It was not Frau von Kruger who answered, but Annie.

"Don't you know that I'm going with you, father?" she said, looking at him in astonishment.

"It isn't necessary," interposed Frau von Kruger. "It might look a little strange, perhaps. People are so ill-natured, you know. Your father is surely enough. Come along with me, my dear."

"I am going with you, father," repeated Annie, exactly as though she had not heard Frau von Kruger.

"She's right, Annie," said Mr. Brand, decisively. "Better go along with her."

"I am going with you," said Annie for the third time, sitting quite still upon her mule and looking straight into her father's face.

Mr. Brand looked back at his daughter in amazement. This was the first time that she had even hesitated to obey a command of his implicitly, and it was principally because he was so entirely taken by surprise that he made no further protest. Annie was by his side when he reached the door of the Monastery.

In a few minutes more all was bustle and alarm within the grey walls. Annie, standing in the hall below and waiting for news, could see Giacomo darting across the landing of the staircase, sometimes with a piece of linen in his hands, and sometimes with a jug of water. There passed at least twenty minutes before a gentle rustle was heard upon the steps, and the Principessa came towards her. The lace upon her head was slightly disarranged and her face a little flushed. A few minutes ago it had been pale with the deadliest fright she had had for years, but already she had

seen enough to guess that all serious danger was out of the question. Though the first moment had been alarming, very likely it would only be a question of a few days' laying-up.

She came towards Annie, and, taking the girl's two hands, looked hard into her face.

"Will he get well?"

The Principessa scrutinised her for a moment longer without answering, and then suddenly drew the girl towards her and kissed her as Annie had never been kissed before.

"Yes, he will get well," she whispered with something between a laugh and a sob; "I promise you, Annee, that he will get well. Oh, Annetta, my sweet Annetta, I cannot tell you how happy I am!"

Annie gazed back in troubled surprise. She did not quite understand what the Principessa meant. But what she did understand at last was that yesterday's question was answered now beyond all doubt.

CHAPTER XVI.

CYPRUS WINE.

ON the forenoon which followed the picnic the Principessa and Mr. Brand were sitting opposite each other in the stone pavilion that stood in the Monastero garden. It was the first time that she had received him anywhere but in the large empty room with the empty grate, and to Mr. Brand it seemed as though the new surroundings had transformed her. There was about her to-day a vivacity of manner that was almost juvenile. Never had the black eyes shone so brilliantly, never had the magic of her smile been so irresistible.

"We are safe!" had been the words with which she greeted Mr. Brand. "Our work is accomplished! They are as good as betrothed already. After yesterday it is not possible that they should meet again without the crisis being reached. I know what Luigi is going to ask, and I know better than the sweet Annee herself knows what she is going to grant. Ah, Signor Brand, my dear Signor Brand, we must drink to the health of our children!"

In such high spirits was the Principessa that Giacomo actually was summoned.

And now one of the last bottles of Cyprus wine which the Monastero cellars had contained was standing upon the stone table, while the Principessa took a delicate sip now and then from her chipped Venetian glass. She could not

quite restrain a slight shudder at something about the way in which her fellow-drinker wiped his mouth with his pocket-handkerchief, but she controlled herself in an instant. The peculiarities of this big brutal child had long since become to her far more amusing than horrifying.

The carnations were past their full bloom by this time and stood almost choked in the long grass, while the furious god with the rose, as well as the simpering goddess with the dagger, had exchanged their robes of green vine for flaming scarlet mantles.

When Mr. Brand inquired after Luigi's health the Principessa laughed in reply.

"That accident, my friend! nothing could have been more providential. I got a terrible fright yesterday evening; I will not deny it—perhaps it is relief that helps to make my heart so light to-day—but, after all, it was only a piece of nonsense. Nothing is really injured; in about four days I believe he will be able to walk again. But Annetta need not know this; it will be no harm if her anxiety continues for a few days longer."

"Hadn't I better tell her that he has broken his leg?" asked Mr. Brand, jovially, for he too was infected by the atmosphere of triumph.

"No, no; that will not do. Lying does not suit you, my friend, while rudeness, on the contrary, suits you to perfection. It always comes to this, that a chronic fault is much more readily forgiven than an accidental one—one on which you have taken out no patent, as it were. Therefore make no experiments with a broken leg. Forgive me, my friend, if my tongue goes a little fast to-day, but I have become strangely young overnight; or may it not be that the wine is going to my head? It is a long time since I have tasted any intoxicating beverage."

And raising her glass once more the Principessa smiled

across at Mr. Brand radiantly, mischievously, almost a little coquettishly. She had certainly altered overnight, but it was not the wine that had gone to her head; it was the flight of that domestic monster which had dogged her footsteps for a quarter of a century. Here, within these walls, where she had lived half of her life haunted by the spectre of her son's future, where she had spent so many weary hours torturing her brain for a solution of the problem of how to save him—here it was given to her to celebrate the victory which had been gained not only over Fate but also over his own ungovernable character. Was it a wonder if her eye sparkled?

“No *mariage de convenance* has ever gone with such perfect smoothness as this one, and I believe firmly that none will turn out more ideal.”

Mr. Brand moved a little uneasily upon his chair.

“There is only one thing,” he remarked, doubtfully; “to hear him talk you would suppose that the first thing he is likely to do with Annie's money is to give fifty pounds to every person he meets.”

The Principessa laughed until the tears came into her eyes.

“Make your mind easy, my good friend. There is no such danger. Once give him real tangible work to do and means to do it with, and the raving Socialist will turn into a perfectly reasonable philanthropist. Is not Annetta there to keep him within rational bounds? It is even my belief that he will continue in the army; and you would like your son-in-law to wear a uniform, would you not, Signor Brand?”

“Yes, I should like that.”

“And it would be a pity, would it not— But, my friend, you are drinking nothing; are you forgetting that this is a betrothal? Would it not be a pity, I say, if he were forced against his will to take off that uniform?”

"Against his will!" repeated Mr. Brand in astonishment. "Surely there is no one who can force him to leave?"

"Unluckily there is someone who can do that. There is a detestable money-lender at Bleistadt."

"Is he in debt?"

The Principessa took another tiny sip, as though to gain courage.

"He owes this man a hundred and fifty florins. I might have got the money by selling the pictures, but since Luigi turned Daniel Silberherz out of the house I cannot prevail upon myself to apply to the picture-dealer again. But I have prevailed upon myself to do something else. Can you guess what it is? I had counted upon the betrothal taking place before August 31st, for that is the last term of payment. Perhaps it would have cost me less then to ask you for a loan. But we are at the 27th now, and—— But what am I talking of?" she interrupted herself with a strained laugh. "Our children are betrothed already, though they do not know it, are they not? Therefore it is but folly if I——"

"You want a hundred and fifty florins?" said Mr. Brand, flushing scarlet from mere delight. "Why on earth didn't you say so before? I believe I've even got the sum about me." And he pulled out his imposing-looking purse and began to examine it. Nothing could be more welcome than this contingency. It was nearly two months now that he had been living with his riches hidden away from the eyes of the world, and many and grievous had been his struggles while attempting to swallow down his money-bags at the Principessa's behest, and all but choking in the process; but this was the dawn of a new and happy era. In the moment that he laid the hundred and fifty florins upon the stone table of the pavilion he began to feel a little more like Thomas Brand again.

The Principessa sat for some seconds staring at the

banknotes without touching them. She had been dreading this moment all the morning. Behind her genuine joy the nervous fear of it had been lurking all along. Now, as she sat with her eyes upon the banknotes, she was aware of two opposite desires. On the one hand she would have wished to snatch up those pieces of paper and press them to her lips because they meant for Luigi the salvation from disgrace, and at the same time she was tormented by the ridiculous desire to fling them back into Mr. Brand's face because he had dared to insult her by making her his debtor.

It was some minutes before she felt sure enough of her own self-control to speak, and then it was a completely different subject that she turned to.

"Have you not forgotten the Curliste?" she asked abruptly. "To-day it would have been excusable, seeing that there are other subjects enough to fill your head."

"No, I have not forgotten it." Mr. Brand opened his purse once more and handed over a slip of paper.

The Principessa took it, still smiling, ran her eye over it, and was about to crumple it up between her fingers when her attention seemed to be caught by something. She looked at the paper again, and her flushed and smiling face became suddenly stern and almost white.

"These are the latest arrivals?" she asked quickly.

"The very latest. I copied them this morning."

"And are you quite certain that you copied them correctly? Can you assure me that these two /'s are in the right place?"

"As correctly as I know how to," said Mr. Brand, shortly, touched upon a sore point.

"So it has come, after all. My terror did not deceive me. All summer it has pursued me, and now it has come true. I suppose it had to be. Without this all would have been too perfect. With this name before my eyes I begin

again to believe that this is mortal life. For three hours past I had almost persuaded myself that this valley of tears had bloomed into Paradise. Yes, I suppose it had to be so."

She was speaking quite quietly now, like a person whom some shock has suddenly sobered, and continually twisting the paper between her fingers as she spoke. Mr. Brand looked at her in astonishment.

"What had to be? I don't understand you. What is that name that you are staring at so?"

The Principessa held the paper towards him, with her finger pointing at one of the lines, and Mr. Brand spelled out the name, "Teresina Bazzanella."

"Do you remember my telling you—many weeks ago now—that in the whole wide-world there was only one person whose opposition to our plans I feared? Well, that person is Teresina Bazzanella."

Mr. Brand went on staring at his hostess. He had so many questions to ask that he ended by asking none at all.

"I will tell you the story. I might have told it you before, only that I was thankful to let the past sleep. It happened two years ago, when Luigi was barely twenty-one. That was the time when I was trying to arrange a marriage for him with one of his cousins who possesses a very fair fortune. The very moment that he guessed my plan he told me to my face that he would never submit to having a wife chosen for him, that he meant to break with all the traditions of the past. Exactly at that time Teresina Bazzanella appeared at Lancegno in the company of her god-mother, the Contessa Ardilio, whom I had known in Roman ball-rooms many decades ago. She is a childless widow, and very good to Teresina, though her fortune is but small. I believe she would not hurt a fly, and yet she nearly broke

my heart by coming to Lancegno at that moment. Luigi was only waiting for an opportunity to demonstrate his independence. It was thus that he fell into her hands, and for a time I believed that he would not escape. Have you seen her yet? It is a matter of opinion whether to call her beautiful, but she is more dangerous than many beautiful women—a little black-eyed minx with a marvellous power over the senses—all the more to be feared because she really has got blood in her veins, and not mere coloured water. Within three days of meeting her Luigi had completely lost his head. I could see at a glance that she had made up her mind to marry him, and it was not hard to guess that she usually attained that which she had determined to get. But the marriage was not to be thought of for a moment, for Teresina is penniless. There was evidently no time to be lost. It was then that I conquered my repugnance and gave my consent to Luigi entering the army. He had been pressing me for it for many months past, but I had not yielded sooner. It seemed the only means of removing him instantly from out of the way of temptation. And—the Heavens be praised!—my sacrifice was accepted. The harm was still to be arrested. The new interest pushed the old one out of sight. Within a month, I believe, he was cured.”

“I see,” said Mr. Brand, meditatively. “You are afraid that when he sees her it will all begin over again. But do you think he will forget Annie as quickly as all that?”

“That is not what I am afraid of, my friend, and I know quite well that Luigi will never again forget Annee, either quickly or slowly. His weakness for Teresina never was more than a fascination of the senses; he never loved her with his soul.”

“Then what can it be that you’re frightened of? For you *are* frightened, aren’t you?”

"Yes, I *am* frightened," said the Principessa, and her eyes said the same as her lips; she looked at Mr. Brand with the startled gaze of a person who has seen a ghost. "I am frightened, but I know not how to tell you what it is that I am frightened of. Perhaps I do not rightly know how to tell myself. Teresina Bazzanella is here, and she wants to marry Luigi, and Luigi is not yet married to Annetta; that means more than you can guess."

Mr. Brand began to cheer up visibly.

"Is that all? How do you know she wants to marry him now? That business was two years ago, wasn't it? Why shouldn't she have forgotten him, just the same as he her?"

The Principessa shook her head despondently.

"There is no such good fortune. Her passion for him always was quite a different thing from his fancy for her, and that creature, I tell you, is as persistent as any wasp that ever buzzed around a ripe peach. If I wanted any further proof, the bare fact of her being here would be proof enough. For what do you suppose that she has brought her patient godmother here from Rome just in time for the close of the season? Perhaps to begin a belated course of baths for the rheumatism which she has not got? Nothing of the kind, I tell you. She is here only because Annee is here. There are several Roman names among the visitors; letters have been exchanged, the gossip of the place has been reported; Teresina has recognised the danger, and she has come here to prevent the betrothal."

"She can't prevent it."

"Can't she? I do not know. I know only that she generally does that which she wants to do. She is not the sort of woman to stop either at disgrace or crime. What is to prevent her from disclosing the plan of this arranged marriage to Luigi?"

"But she doesn't know the plan, surely?"

"She will know it before she has been forty-eight hours in the place. It would need to be a much finer web than we have spun to remain hidden before those needles of eyes. Do not ask me how she will do it—by what means. I cannot tell you. What I can tell you is that that woman comes from a race of spies, that she is born to detect and pry—a little snake who slips into every hole and behind every screen, too quick and too slippery ever to be caught. She is the only woman, old or young, of whom I have ever felt fear. My wits are good, but I am not quite certain that I could measure them with hers. She has even got something of myself in her, but a great deal more of her own self. Believe me, it is a combination not easy to master. My friend, we must be very careful."

Mr. Brand had listened incredulously.

"Doesn't it strike you that this Roman young lady has got up rather late in the day? Even supposing she were to get hold of our plot, what do you imagine could come of it *now*?"

"Do not ask me," said the Principessa, quickly. "I do not want to look that way. We have spoken enough for today. Send me word if even the smallest thing occurs. I must see if Luigi is awake."

She went straight to Luigi's bedside with the banknotes in her hand.

"Here, my son, is what will put your mind at rest. I told you that I should raise the money before the end of the month, and we have yet got four days until the 31st."

Luigi clutched at the banknotes, and at the same time he looked at her almost suspiciously.

"But, *madre mia*, where did you get them from?"

"There were those lava ornaments, you know. I told you that I was sending them to Terrente."

"But were they worth a hundred and fifty florins?"

"Why not? Some of them were set in gold."

Luigi laughed. "Well, this is better. I almost suspected that you had been selling your clothes."

It was an immense relief. Now that he had fully awakened to the fact that this was August 27th, he could not at all understand how it came about that his alarm had lately been slumbering so sweetly.

On the following day towards midday he got out of bed. He was supposed to be asleep just then, and it was by way of surprising his mother that he opened the door of her room without knocking.

The Principessa was sitting at her dressing-table, laying back some things in a box. She turned quickly at his entrance.

"Ah, Luigi, you almost gave me a fright; you know that you should still be lying down."

"It is too dull over there," said Luigi, stooping to pick up something that had fallen off the dressing-table.

"Why, *madre mia*, that is surely one of the lava ornaments which you told me you had sent to Terrente?"

"Only an ear-ring. The second one is lost, so it was no use by itself."

And the Principessa shut the dressing-case and rose from her chair.

Luigi looked at his mother and seemed about to say something more; but, after all, it had only been a passing doubt, and it went again almost as readily as it had come.

CHAPTER XVII.

TERESINA.

Two days had passed since the bottle of Cyprus wine had been uncorked in the pavilion, and the Principessa still sat before the empty grate and waited hour by hour for that which was to come, for that something would come she never for an instant doubted. This passive expectation was very much harder to bear than an open attack would have been, for the Principessa belonged to the order of fighters who, when they do not see the flash of the sword nor hear the whizz of the arrow, grow uneasy instead of easy, because their instinct leads them to conclude that under cover of this phantom peace the enemy is either undermining their ground or eating up their provisions in secret.

It was an unspeakable relief when, towards sunset on the second day of waiting, Giacomo's step was heard to cross the library, accompanied by another and far lighter footfall. Immediately the Principessa's figure straightened; with steady fingers she smoothed out the folds of her lace, and looked expectantly towards the door with eyes that seemed to thirst for battle.

Teresina said nothing as she advanced towards her hostess. While she crossed the floor of the big room the old woman and the young woman had plenty of time to observe each other. When the Principessa noted that Teresina was smiling, there immediately appeared a smile upon her own

lips, for she had already resolved to take her cue from her enemy. For nearly a minute they smiled thus at each other like mother and daughter, while taking each other's measure more accurately than a mathematical calculation could have done. The old woman saw that the young woman had lost nothing in looks during these two years, and had gained something in audacity; while the young woman had understood in a single instant that the work she had to do would be even harder than she had supposed.

It was the Principessa who spoke first.

"Do I really see aright? Is that you, Teresina?" she broke out with a surprise so naïve that the retreating Giacomo was completely taken in. "Who ever would have thought to see you at Lancegno! What a surprise, *figlia mia!*"

She had thought of saying, "What a *sweet* surprise!" but discarded the adjective at the last moment. This little Roman was not the style of audience before whom it would be safe to overdo a part.

"Yes, I knew you would be glad to see me," answered Teresina, still showing her exquisitely tiny teeth in a dutiful smile.

"And your kind godmother—my old friend Mella?"

"She sends you her warmest remembrances, which she cannot bring you herself because of her rheumatism."

By this time Teresina had accepted the Principessa's invitation to be seated, and was sitting—with only the worn inlaid table between her and her hostess—upon that chair on which Annie Brand had so often sat this summer. While trying to recall the names of half-forgotten Roman acquaintances in order to have an excuse for making inquiries after their health, the Principessa, almost unconsciously, was comparing the two girls. She could think of no greater contrast than the tall, pure-featured English girl

with the solemn brown eyes, and this miniature figure with the exquisitely delicate face that was pale and yet glowing all at once—with the restless, red lips which seemed for ever working in accompaniment to that which busied the mind, and with eyes that were at the same time as black as coals and as keen as needles. She was on too small a scale to be, strictly speaking, beautiful, and she was also too slight to satisfy most tastes. "My objection to her is that she will be skinny and yellow in ten years," a *connoisseur* had once said of her, to which another *connoisseur* had replied, with remarkable philosophy, that this was not ten years hence. What *he* objected to about her was that there was too little of her altogether. Possibly he was right, and yet possibly, too, an inch or two more, either in height or in breadth, would have destroyed the symmetry of this dainty figure, whose peculiar charm had probably been planned for this particular size of model.

"And you say that your sisters are all quite well?" inquired the Principessa when she had exhausted all the names she could remember.

"No, I did not say so. Maria has had the fever rather badly this summer. They say she requires change of air."

"Then it is she who should have come to Lancegno," said the Principessa, quickly.

"Instead of me?" Teresina's white teeth flashed out more pleasantly than ever. "Perhaps it would have done her good. But my godmother is so used to me that it would be unkind to give the poor old lady a new companion."

"So it would," agreed the Principessa, serenely, while openly returning her visitor's gaze. They sat well-nigh facing each other, and each was careful never to let the other's eyes escape her. They watched each other as a pair of duellists might do, of which each knows well that the

other is worthy of his steel. All this was only a preliminary, of course—a mere playful fencing with the weapons in order to try the points—and neither wanted to miss the moment at which the real encounter would begin, for a great deal depends upon how the first stroke is parried.

“So it would undoubtedly be unkind. Dear Mella! She always was so sensitive. How I should love a talk with her! Do you think it possible that she will be able to cross the valley?”

“I cannot say. Perhaps by next week the baths may have put her on her feet again, but to-day it was out of the question.”

“With whom, then, did you walk?”

“With myself, of course; you know that I have got no maid.”

“By yourself? But, *figlia mia*, this is folly! You surely know well how people talk when a young girl walks alone?”

“And surely you know well that I let them talk to their heart’s content so long as I have my will?”

The Principessa shook her forefinger in playfully maternal reproach.

“Ah, *cattiva*! you always belonged to the emancipated ones. You should have put off your visit till next week.”

“You know I could not wait so long,” said Teresina, looking straight into the Principessa’s eyes with a roguish frankness that was almost irresistible, “and neither could I have been so unkind as to let *you* wait for so long. Surely you must understand that I was burning to bring you my congratulations upon the auspicious event.”

The old lady leant back languidly in her chair. She understood that the moment was now come.

“Ah, well; it is true enough that my Uncle Carlo’s

death brought us a slight turn of good fortune, but no doubt the report has greatly exaggerated the truth."

"I do not think it has exaggerated anything; my observations even tell me that it has almost said too little. What greater turn of good fortune could you have than a beautiful and wealthy daughter-in-law, who besides is doubtless a model of all the virtues? Surely my dear Principessa must be harder than ever to please if this still leaves her dissatisfied!"

The Principessa put back her head, and uttered a musical little laugh.

"That is an enticing picture indeed! You quite make my mouth water. But unfortunately for me you have been misinformed. I possess no daughter-in-law whom this description fits."

"And the *bella Inglese*?" asked Teresina, without ceasing to smile for an instant. "Does not my description fit her to perfection?"

"You mean the Signorina Brand?" To masquerade incomprehension was too clumsy a manœuvre for the Principessa. "But she is not my daughter-in-law."

"Of course not. It was stupid of me not to put in the word 'future.' But from what one hears on all sides that future is probably not a very distant one. When once the hearts have found each other——"

Her tone was sinking lower with each word. The soft speech seemed ready to die away in a caressing murmur, but the red lips were more restless than ever, and the breath came sometimes short and sometimes long.

"When once the hearts have found each other, or when once they have been led together——"

"Ah, well, as for that," remarked the Principessa, deliberately, "the ways of Providence are strange."

"But the ways of men are stranger," said Teresina,

very low. And then for one minute they looked at each other in silence, the Principessa slowly fanning herself, and the girl tearing morsels of lace off the border of her parasol. All at once, with a muttered exclamation, she got up from her chair, throwing the parasol from her.

"We cannot play this comedy further," she said, swiftly and passionately; "neither you nor I can do it. You know everything and I know everything. Let there be an end of this. You know that I am here only because I love your son; because I have loved him for two years and can never love another."

The Principessa laid down her fan and sat up in her chair with kindling eyes, but she did not yet speak, for the other had more to say.

"He loved me—you know that he did—it was you who took him from me."

"Yes, it was I; I took him from despair. He is my only child."

"You took him from love, from a real, burning love, the love that every man finds only once in a life-time. Do you imagine that the heart of that slow, cold Inglese will ever cleave to him as my heart cleaves? You know it cannot be. It was you who took him from me. Ah! give him to me back again! You know that I love him."

She made two steps forward, and flung herself upon her knees beside the Principessa's chair with her glowing face uplifted and two unsteady hands clasped in supplication. It was not possible entirely to escape the influence of the fire in her eyes and of the passion on her lips, even though the Principessa knew exactly how much the passion was worth. And, after all, the man on whom this young woman had fixed her heart was the same man whom this old woman would have been ready to die for. For a short space the two pairs of black eyes stared into each other.

Then, gathering herself together, the Principessa pushed away the hands that were seeking hers. She had become aware with a start that she was not quite unmoved.

"No," she said, harshly; "I do not know that you love him. I know only that you have set your mind upon having him, and that you have a head as hard as one of the stones in the river-bed yonder. But my head, too, is not soft, and I will never give him to you."

"Because I am a beggar. I know it—he has no money and I have no money—I know it well; but what is money and what is poverty beside such a love as mine?"

"It is not because you are a beggar; you do not understand. Even if you were the greatest heiress in Italy I would never give my son to you. You are not worthy of him. What is this that you call love? You love him, not because his soul is true and his mind high, but because his eyes are black and his limbs well-made. To you it would make no difference if behind those black eyes there were dull wits, and behind those straight limbs a sordid soul. You covet only the shell. That is not love—you desecrate the sacred word—that is a rapture of the senses. You scream for him and stamp for him as a child screams for a gaudy toy, and when once you possessed him you would bewitch his reason, you would torment him with your senseless jealousy, and in the end there is no saying whether you would not even drag him down to your own level. It would be giving him to his ruin to give him to you."

"Then there is no hope for me?"

Teresina had pulled back the hands that had been repulsed, but without yet changing her attitude. Her features had almost ceased to work

The Principessa shook her head with tight-closed lips.

"And he will marry the English girl?"

"He will marry whom he will."

"That was a slip of the tongue, was it not? You meant to say whom *you* will. The Principessa Roccattelli wills that her son shall live upon the millions of the English workman."

"And what of the millions?" said the Principessa, starting as though under a sting. "If Luigi marries her he marries her because he loves her, and because she is worthy of his love. Should he renounce her because of her millions? With them or without them, I tell you to your face that both your body and soul together are not worth as much as one finger of her hand. Shall I stand in the way of his happiness because of the empty pride of a name? No. To the English girl I will give him, but never to you."

It was only at this moment that Teresina appeared to become aware that she was still upon her knees. She got to her feet and began smoothing her dress with both hands.

"Thank you," she said, with perfectly recovered coolness, "that was all I wanted to know. I had guessed at the millions, but I could not be quite certain until I had direct evidence."

The Principessa sat upright, stiff with astonishment. Too late she recognised what that one minute had cost her in which her self-control had faltered.

"What millions are you speaking of?" she forced herself to ask.

"Don't, dear Principessa. Between you and me these games are absurd. Would I be here to-day if I had not ascertained all there was to know? You forget surely that there are such things in the world as ladies' maids and bribes—though as for these last it is sadly true that I cannot afford to work on a magnificent scale. I had found out almost all that I wanted to know, only for the money I still wished to have more than circumstantial evidence, and you have supplied me with that."

While still speaking she looked round her in search of something, then, catching sight of the tarnished mirror on the opposite wall, she went up to it and began carefully putting right her brown straw hat, which had got unsettled during the past scene. She undid the veil, and tied it over again with fingers that were now perfectly steady. The Principessa watched her with an undefined terror at her heart. She had known Teresina almost from her childhood; she knew what was to be expected of her; and yet every time the girl surprised her over again.

When she had done with the veil Teresina surveyed herself critically in the glass, then she stepped aside and picked up the parasol, which still lay where she had flung it down. Her face now wore the same smile which it had worn at the beginning of the visit, only she was rather paler. She did not speak again, but went out, drawing on her gloves, and with only a conventional inclination of the head. She walked like a person who has a definite object before her.

"She can do nothing," said the Principessa half aloud, and in the same instant she struggled with the desire to call Teresina back again before the light footfall had entirely died away. She half rose from her chair and sank back again. "It is a terrible thing to grow old," she whispered. "Ten years ago this could not have happened to me. I cannot any more compete with youth. But she can do nothing. Oh, my God, what will she do?"

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE CORAL EARRINGS.

THE sharp stones of the river bed did not hurt Teresina's feet that day. It was only when she reached home that she became aware that her single good pair of shoes were cut through and through in several places.

"What I require now is a proof for her," she repeated to herself, as she pushed feverishly onwards. "I know everything that I need to know, but what I require is something to convince her."

While she pursued both her thoughts and her way the Contessa Ardilio was spending her time in feebly pacing her bedroom and inventing possibilities which could account for the long absence of her goddaughter; and yet she might have been used to it by this time, for to chaperon Teresina was to live in a state of continual uncertainty as to what the next hour might bring. Since her babyhood neither father nor mother had ever had the smallest influence upon the girl. Beside their eldest daughter they were just as complete even though rather larger ciphers than the three younger sisters who at home in the dingy Roman lodging were waiting for Teresina's return. It was always Teresina on whom all the hopes of the family had turned, for in her person not only every scrap of energy which they had among them seemed to have been concentrated, but likewise every scrap of beauty. Besides, Tere-

sina had a godmother, who, although poor when compared to most other people, was rich in comparison to the pensioned Captain Bazzanella. The Contessa Ardilio played the fairy godmother on a more than modest scale, her gifts rarely exceeding a basket of oranges or a few yards of sash ribbon, and the favours she was in a position to confer being generally limited to giving Teresina an occasional glimpse of a Roman drawing-room; but even this was infinitely better than nothing, and the drawing-rooms, in especial, might lead to a great deal more. Teresina herself appeared to be the least interested in the prospect of a possibly prosperous marriage. By the time she was nineteen she had already refused several very fair offers, not because of unsatisfied ambition—she did not happen to be ambitious—but because none of her suitors had taken her fancy. The entire family were in despair; they could not see what was wrong about the suitors in question. It was when she was nineteen that the doctors had suddenly prescribed a change of air, as the only means of recovering from a bad attack of Roman fever, and it was then that the Contessa Ardilio had scraped together all her available possessions in order to take her goddaughter to Lancegno. On the first evening on which she had felt strong enough to go down to the Cursalon Luigi had been introduced to her. That night, while saying good-night to her goddaughter at the bedroom door, the Contessa Ardilio had said, with a pleasant smile: "The waters have surely begun to do you good already, my sweet dove; your eyes are beginning to look like themselves again."

Instead of answering, Teresina asked another question.

"Do you know what was wrong with all the other men who wanted to marry me? I have found it out to-night."

"What?" asked the Contessa, startled.

"They were not Luigi Roccattelli. That is why I could

get up no interest in them. I knew that the man whom I would want to marry must be somewhere, and now I have found him."

"But you know nothing of him," said the Contessa. "He may not be a good man."

"I don't care. I like the shape of his eyes—they are cut so long—and I like the tint of his face."

"But supposing he is heartless?"

"I don't care. I like that particular shade of brown skin."

The Contessa was more startled than ever, but beside her goddaughter she, too, had never been more than a cipher. When the next few days showed beyond hope of miscomprehension what Teresina's intentions were, all she ventured upon were a few feeble objections on the score of prospective starvation. She was laughed at for her pains. The word "starvation" had no terrors for Teresina, just as the word "affluence" had no attractions for her. Hers was one of those fiercely energetic natures who are too restless to enjoy the delights of riches, too stormy to appreciate the luxury of idleness, and altogether too highly strung fully to realise the practical miseries of life, even when living in their midst. On them bodily privation leaves but little mark, so long as they are for ever pressing onward towards whatever object they have seized upon for their own.

After a few weeks the break had come. Teresina went back to Rome, knowing herself to have been outwitted by the Principessa, but not yet believing herself finally beaten. She was capable not only of acting, but also of lying in wait, if this promised to answer better. She had waited for two years now, and had, after all, almost missed the danger that loomed so large. The note of alarm had been sounded in the letter of a Roman girl acquaintance, and had not been meant as a note of alarm at all, but only as a harmless piece

of gossip. On the very day of the arrival of the letter the godmother had been told to pack up for Lancegno, and had done so without daring to express the doubts gnawing at her submissive heart as to whether there was quite enough money in her purse to cover the return journey. The will of her "sweetest dove" had always been to her a law before which she trembled.

Teresina's first step on reaching Lancegno had been to have Annie Brand pointed out to her. At sight of her her heart sank for a moment. The fight would be harder than she had supposed, but she still believed that she would win.

By the evening of the first day she had got the following facts before her eyes: Luigi Roccatelli was courting this English girl, and, to judge from all the available symptoms, he was courting her with his mother's approval. This was as much as to say that Miss Brand must be rich, probably even very rich. Two years ago, at their stormy parting, the Principessa had told the girl to her face that her son would never, with her consent, marry a penniless wife. Teresina had never forgotten that, and had guessed the rest for herself.

Presently various casual inquiries had brought to light the fact of Mr. Brand's visits to the Monastero. This set Teresina thinking. She knew all about the Principessa's aversion to visitors, and after a short talk between two courses of the *table d'hôte* she had made up her mind about Mr. Brand. It could not possibly be for his own sake that the Principessa encouraged him. There must necessarily be some other object; could there exist an understanding?

The clue was in her hand now, though she did not know it yet, and though at first she followed it up almost at random. It was only after she had ascertained the respective dates of Luigi's and of Annie's appearance on the scene that she began to see daylight. In the eyes of an instinctive de-

tective the coincidence was too remarkable to be a coincidence. The next stage was to discover the circumstances attending these appearances. Miss Brand's maid was the person whom under the circumstances it was most natural to turn to first, but it could not be done without money, and Teresina had no money. She had an enamelled brooch, however, a birthday gift of her godmother's, and with this in her hand she went off at dusk to Signor Grillo, the small misshapen shopkeeper who kept the store under the archway, and who, besides being a "mixed merchant," occasionally dabbled in the pawnbroking line.

He was not very generous, but fortunately neither was Rankin very hard-hearted. Five silver florins seemed to her very decent pay for merely talking to this pleasant-spoken young lady about her hurried engagement by Miss Bellew—on the back of a telegram it seemed—and about how she (Rankin) had spent most of her time while tearing across the Continent in railway carriages in planning mourning gowns, only to be somewhat disappointed on arriving here to discover that Mrs. Brand was in as good health as she ever appeared to be, and that no mourning gowns were required.

This was all that Teresina required to know about the appearance of one of the two chief actors. The details which concerned the second were supplied to her by Luigi's comrade. A glove dropped at a judicious moment and spot had supplied the necessary pretext for an introduction, and an apparently unavoidable sequence of remarks had brought the conversation round to the single mutual acquaintance they possessed. She supposed that it was on account of his health that Prince Roccattelli had left the regiment this summer. His health? Not a bit of it, she was told, something much pleasanter than his health, and then Bernegg, nothing loth to prolong the conversation with this lively

brunette, who knew exactly how to use her eyes, went on in his best style to tell the story of the expectations in the regiment, and of how the inheritance dropped from heaven had turned out to consist of four pictures. Teresina did not prolong the conversation after this; she knew almost everything by this time.

It was now the evening of the second day. The third day was spent in picking up trifles here and there—from her Roman correspondent, from the woman at the river house, even from the “mixed merchant” under the archway—and in putting them together after the system that two and two are put. By the afternoon there stood in her mind an edifice of theory, built of facts and cemented with surmises. Of one fact only she was not certain, and that was the fact of the million, or the millions, whichever it might turn out to be. Take away this one stone, and her whole theory must come down with a rush. Rankin had been useless on this point. She had never heard of Mr. Brand before the day on which Miss Bellew had engaged her in his name, almost at a moment’s notice, and since her arrival here she had never heard either Mr. or Mrs. Brand let fall any remark which might give one a clue to their fortune, though to judge from the quality of their under-linen and their hair-brushes she supposed they must be pretty well off. She had, indeed, hoped to learn more about the family from Mrs. Brand’s maid; but it appeared that that rigidly British person had been unable to stand “those nasty foreign places,” and had gone back to England in a huff, previous to Rankin’s arrival on the scene.

“Pretty well off,” was not what Teresina expected to hear, for she had gauged the Principessa’s ambition correctly. It was to the Principessa that she went for the one link still missing in the chain, and it was from the Principessa’s lips that she learnt the truth.

And now in the sunset light she was hastening across the valley. At last she held the complete chain in her hand.

"What I require is a proof for *her*," she said to herself. "And it must be a very clear proof, for I have taken her measure, and she will be slow to believe. She will never accept a stranger's word against her father. Mere surmises will have no weight with her. It must be a proof, a tangible proof, something that she can hold in her hand."

She pushed on ever faster among the stones, turning over thoughts in her mind and scarcely aware of her surroundings. She had not yet reached the middle of the valley, when in the dusk she all but ran against a lad in picturesque rags, whom she had seen herding goats here the day before. He was not herding goats now, but with a mulberry branch for a staff was hopping along from boulder to boulder.

"*Infelice!* You almost knocked me over!" cried Tere-sina, standing still abruptly and clenching her teeth with an instinctive movement which with her was a habit.

She had gone scarcely a dozen paces when she stood still again and considered. She had quite suddenly remembered having heard from Rankin that the small goatherd of the river bed had frequently acted as letter-carrier between Mr. Brand and the Principessa; there were no goats within sight—could he by some merciful dispensation of Providence be doing so now?

"Ha!" she called after him shrilly, and beckoned him to her.

The goatherd gaped, but obeyed.

"You have got a letter from the Signor Inglese to the Principessa?" she asserted rather than asked.

"*Si, Signora.*"

"Give it to me. There is no need for you to go across

the valley. I am going back there to-morrow ; I will take it."

The gaping lad fumbled in his pocket. Point blank to disobey so distinct a tone of command—the only tone with which he was acquainted—did not even occur to him, and yet vague doubts moved in his mind.

Teresina saw it and put her hand in her pocket, but immediately remembered that there was nothing there. Then she felt instinctively for her brooch, but it was the "mixed merchant" who had that. She thought of her pocket-handkerchief, but rejected that idea on the instant, and then it flashed upon her that there were still her coral earrings. She had slept in them ever since she had been confirmed, but of course that was no matter. She took them out so vehemently now that it looked as though she were tearing them out, and at sight of the two red knobs lying in his dirty palms the goatherd's gape turned to a grin, and the second dirty hand went to the pocket and brought out the letter.

When Teresina reached the Curhaus just after the fall of dark she found her godmother almost in hysterics.

"My whitest dove, do you know that you have killed me? Where have you hidden yourself all these hours? You are quite breathless; your shoes are torn, and—ah, *Santa Vergine!*—your earrings are gone! You have had an accident? I knew it would be so. Lamb of my heart, do you know that your sweet ear is bleeding?"

"No, I did not know it," said Teresina, as she sat down on the nearest chair. "I did not feel anything. It is true that I have lost my earrings, but it is true also that I have had a charming walk—everything that could be desired."

And she smiled at her godmother with the hot tears in her eyes.

CHAPTER XIX.

"THE ROMAN GIRL."

ANNIE did not appear in the Cursalon that evening, and she took her breakfast in her room next morning. These days of waiting and of wondering were beginning to tell upon her a little. Nothing distinct as to the Principe's state was to be elicited from her father, and her courage failed her for a point-blank inquiry of the doctor. For anything she knew it might be weeks before Luigi could again cross the valley, and she supposed that before then they would have left the place, since the season was fast approaching its close. There would, of course, have been the resource of crossing the valley herself, but somehow that seemed entirely out of the question now.

During the midday meal she once or twice became aware of a pair of very black eyes watching her. They were the eyes of a Roman girl, whose name she did not even know, but with whom she had had some indifferent talk a few days ago, one evening in the Cursalon. She felt no desire to pursue the acquaintance; there was in this girl some element which she had never yet met in anyone else, and which she did not understand. The glance disturbed her—perhaps only because the eyes were too black and too keen.

At first she fancied she must be mistaken. But look up

when she would she met the black eyes, and however lively might be the talk at the luncheon-table, this stranger alone was sitting quite silent.

Annie was rather glad when luncheon was over. She fetched her hat and sought out the most comparatively private walk in the garden, for she had a great deal to think about. Here she hoped to be undisturbed, for she was beyond the region of the flower-beds and artificial ponds, and even the benches were of an inferior quality; but scarcely had she sat down when, somewhat to her annoyance, a small, slight figure appeared under the trees, walking rapidly. As she approached, Annie's annoyance increased, for she recognized "the Roman girl."

"You have sought a charmingly retired spot," said the stranger, speaking in tolerable English, and standing still in front of the bench, while disclosing in a brilliant smile her tiny white teeth that were like the teeth of some small rodent animal. "Is it too much of a liberty if I take a place near you?"

Annie was about to reply when, on the other side, a step was heard, and someone in a blue uniform appeared close at hand. For one instant Annie's heart leapt up with a foolish hope, but the next already she had recognised Lieutenant Bernegg, and she flushed angrily. This second intrusion was far more annoying than the first. Surely within the days that had passed since the picnic she had given this persistent lieutenant very clearly to understand that his attentions were unwelcome.

At his approach the stranger quickly turned her head, and her whole expression changed. It almost seemed to Annie that she muttered something between her teeth. It was evident that Bernegg's appearance was as little welcome to her as to Annie. Having listened for a few minutes to the *petites niaiseries* with which he opened the

conversation, "the Roman girl" turned impatiently and pursued her way.

Later in the afternoon something not dissimilar occurred. Principally out of fear of Bernegg, Annie had kept upstairs most of the time, but it so happened that Mrs. Brand had some small purchases to make, and, as she was feeling fairly strong to-day, Annie and her mother started up the village street a little after four o'clock. As they walked along between the close double row of houses Annie had not noticed even a single Curhaus patient, but just as they stepped out of Signor Grillo's premises she almost started to see "the Roman girl" standing under the archway.

"There are still those letters for the post," Mrs. Brand was saying to her daughter rather disconsolately. "And it's quite at the other end of the street, isn't it? I'm not sure that I haven't overtaxed my strength. You don't mind going alone, do you?"

The figure under the archway stepped forward.

"There is no necessity for your daughter going alone," she said, eagerly. "I can easily walk up the street with her. Two of us are safer than one, you know," she added with a bewitching smile. "You don't know me?"—for Mrs. Brand was staring in perplexity—"I am one of your fellow-patients—that is to say, my godmother, the Contessa Ardilio, is—you can trust your daughter quite safely to me. And meanwhile you can take a rest upon that bench over yonder; we shall not be long away."

On one side of the piazza there stood a decrepit mulberry tree whose trunk was split through and through, and had been stuffed up with stones, the unavoidable and omnipresent river stones. Its twisted branches shaded a ponderous stone bench—the favourite lounge of the village gossips after sunset. Mrs. Brand was still looking doubtfully at the

bench when Annie, who had not spoken yet, said in a decisive tone :

"There is no hurry about the letters, mother ; Rankin can take them later. It will be better for you to come straight home. I don't like leaving you here by yourself."

It was quite true that Annie did not like to leave her mother, but it was also true that she was rather glad to escape being left alone with this stranger. She could not get rid of the idea that the other had something which she wanted to say to her, although her common sense told her that of course this could only be a fancy of hers. Her mind was too well occupied at the other side of the valley to leave room for anything like keen curiosity ; and it was in great part the mere desire to think on unmolested that led her to avoid the other girl.

While dressing for dinner that evening Annie said to Rankin :

"Why have you put out the lace gown, Rankin ? It's so terribly dressy for the *table d'hôte*."

"But there's the concert, miss ; surely you haven't forgotten ?"

Annie had quite forgotten. There had already been three or four of these mild musical gatherings, which simply consisted in all those patients who could sing a song or play a sonata (and also some who couldn't) exercising their gifts upon the unmusical portion of the company ; but the thing was always called a concert, and the occasion always treated in a somewhat festive manner.

Owing to some alterations in the places Annie discovered that her new acquaintance was now sitting on the same side of the table as herself, although several places off, so that she felt almost safe from the black eyes. Bernegg, however, had secured the place to her left, and from him there seemed to be no escape. Once the Cursalon was reached, she hoped

finally to get rid of them both, but before she had reached the Cursalon she began to see that her hopes were futile. The chattering company had scarcely invaded the long passage when already Teresina was by her side. This time she dispensed with any conventional beginnings.

"Come with me outside, on to the verandah," she said in a low voice, which nevertheless was very distinct; and as she said it she unexpectedly slipped her hand under Annie's arm as though it were the most natural thing in the world to do.

Annie looked at her in astonishment. "I am not going on to the verandah," she answered, coldly. "I am going into the Cursalon."

"Then let me sit near you, and let there not be listeners. We two must speak together."

"But we are strangers, surely; what can we have to say to each other?"

"I have something which I must show you."

Annie made no reply. She had suddenly grown scarlet and was staring at something in the Cursalon, whose door they had just reached. Teresina followed her look, and at the same instant Annie felt the fingers on her arm tightening almost painfully. There was a muttered word which she did not catch, then with a white face and teeth that had closed convulsively "the Roman girl" had turned away.

It did not seem a very long time after that that Annie found herself listening to a quite inoffensive duet performed by the sisters Kruger to the maternal accompaniment, while her father sat on one side of her, and on the other, Luigi. The first sight of him had been more of a shock than a pleasure. So little did she trust her eyes that she could not feel certain of not seeing his ghost. By the time he had done explaining to Mr. Brand that he was here indeed against the doctor's orders, but that the cart he had come

over the valley in had, after all, not bumped him so very badly, she had succeeded in regaining some of her self-control.

"I suppose you had heard of the concert," was all she could think of saying.

"No, I had not heard of the concert, or, at least, I do not remember hearing; but I had heard that you would soon be leaving Lancegno; my mother mentioned it to-day."

He spoke quite simply, looking straight into her eyes, and Annie made no attempt to reply. They were almost the last words that passed between them while they sat side by side upon the red velvet seat, listening without hearing them to the steady succession of sonatas and songs. There was, indeed, nothing which they could have talked about. After that first minute both understood that conventional talk between them was impossible, and that which they really had to say to each other was equally impossible in this place. Both knew that the end must come to-day. They sat, never looking at each other, yet aware of each breath which the other drew, Annie gripping the silver fan upon her knee and Luigi's brown hands pressing ever harder against each other—both he and she entirely unconscious of the piercing eyes that were watching them from the other side of the room, and of the mobile red mouth that seemed to be keeping time to the slightest of their movements. From second to second it became more impossible even to exchange a glance, and from second to second, too, the room seemed to be growing hotter. By the time the third sonata had come to an end the temperature was well-nigh unbearable.

After the third sonata it was Herr Plenn's turn to sing a comic song. Despite the comic song, this was to be counted as a day of rest for the Bajazzo, for on concert days the company did not expect to be amused in the same way as on common days. At these fortunate junctures he could

even enter a room unobserved, though at other times his mere appearance in the doorway was the signal for a general laugh—a laugh that was expectant of the things to come. If the things happened not to come, this was, of course, represented as unfair. For Herr Plenn not to be funny was, in the general opinion, to cheat the company in a very mean manner.

The comic song to-day was in Vienna dialect, and elicited thunders of applause, mingled with stormy *encores*. Under cover of the general excitement, Luigi turned to Annie and said quickly:

“Please come with me into the passage.”

He might have said something about the heat, but he never even thought of requiring an excuse, just as little as Annie thought of refusing his request. They were sitting very near the open door. She got-up without a moment's hesitation and followed him into the passage.

Here some of the nurses were standing in groups, and in the background were hovering various greasy-looking lower domestics, who had slunk up from the kitchen regions in order to gather up the crumbs of the concert.

Luigi and Annie turned instinctively to the verandah. The night was dark, and all the light there was came from the windows of the Cursalon. Here at last they were quite alone. They walked for some paces side by side, still in silence. Then Luigi stood still, and, taking both Annie's hands in his, bent down towards her.

“You know what I have to say to you,” he said in an intense whisper.

He had not said more when from somewhere among the shadows a dark but fairy-like figure seemed to rise up beside them.

“You forgot your fan,” said Teresina in a choking voice, and she held the silver fan straight towards Annie as

though it had been a knife. Annie could not distinctly see her features, but she knew the black eyes immediately; they seemed even brighter in the dark than in the light.

Luigi had dropped Annie's hands in an instant. His first impulse had evidently been one of anger, but he succeeded in controlling himself.

"Come to the river house to-morrow," he whispered rapidly into Annie's ear, and then, without further word or sign, turned and went out into the darkness.

Annie was standing alone with the stranger. She looked at her with quivering underlip, reproachfully.

"You think, do you not, that he was going to tell you that he loves you?" said Teresina, still struggling with her excitement. Then, as Annie stared at her in silence: "Yes, you are right, he would have told you so if I had not come; but it would have been a lie."

"I don't believe that," said Annie, abruptly and angrily.

"Don't you? Listen to what I say. You're an innocent; it's a shame to deceive you; but it is I who am going to open your eyes. Have you really never guessed that the whole thing has been a plot from the beginning?"

"Nonsense," said Annie, after a momentary pause of sheer amazement. "What sort of plot are you talking of?"

"Of the plot to bring your fortune and his title together—a very pretty plot too, and quite worthy of the Principessa. Hush, for a minute, let me speak. You feel perhaps as though you could kill me for my words, but wait till I have said all, and then perhaps you will want to kill someone else. Let us begin at the beginning. You know that you are rich and that he has a prince's crown. I know that the Principessa wants a fortune for her son, and do you not think it very likely that the workman who is

your father would wish to have a title for his daughter? These two made acquaintance early in the summer; your father was often at the Monastero—I know it for certain—then you were sent for. Have you ever weighed the pretext on which you were sent for, and did you or did you not find it wanting? I leave it to yourself. *He* also was sent for at that time. I do not know where your first meeting was, but I will risk my soul that it was not accidental. Think of it yourself. Was not the Principessa the first person to whom you were taken? Did she not from the first take as much interest in you, as though you were her daughter? Think of it all; think of it. Were you not given constant opportunities of meeting? Do you not yet understand?"

Once or twice at first Annie had attempted to interrupt the other's words; now she stood rigid, with her thoughts in a horror-stricken whirl. Surely she had heard something very like this before. Was this "the Roman girl" speaking, or was it her school-fellow Ellen—a different Ellen, with black eyes and white teeth that flashed in the shadow? But as yet she had scarcely even begun to believe. It was too far off, too impossible, too different from that which had almost happened only a few minutes ago. As Teresina's words flowed on, rapidly, eagerly, almost irresistibly, it passed through her mind that this or that particular was true, that this or that circumstance tallied strangely; but this was not belief, at the most it was doubt. It never occurred to her to wonder how this stranger had come by all this knowledge, nor why she was telling her this, for even doubt is enough to numb the power of thought. When the other had done speaking, Annie still stood without moving and quite silent. Teresina looked at her impatiently, waiting for some sign.

"Do you believe me now?" she asked.

"No."

"And you still believe that what he would have said to you to-night would have been the truth? You simpleton!" and her breath began to grow more laboured. "You will not yet understand. It is your fortune that he wants, but it is *me* that he loves. Yes, hear it; it is *me, me, me!* It is *me* whom he would have married two years ago, had I not been a beggar, and therefore hated by his mother. He is selling himself for your money, while his heart is mine."

She had put her face close to Annie's, and stared straight into the other's horror-stricken eyes. Even in this half darkness Annie could see how the red lips twitched with excitement.

"Do you believe me?"

"No," said Annie again, not even knowing what she said. She felt only that she must say "No" at any price.

"Oh, you English!" said Tercina, between her clenched teeth. "Is this not yet enough? Have I not said everything?" She looked about her, as though in search of something, then with her hand she struck her forehead.

"It is true, I have not said everything. What am I thinking of? We are going to be interrupted; take this, it will help you to believe."

She pushed a piece of paper into Annie's hand, and walked away rapidly, just as a few figures emerged from a doorway close at hand.

Annie took the piece of paper and went with it to the nearest of the broad bands of light with which the Cursalon windows chequered the verandah. It was a note in her father's handwriting and addressed to the Principessa. She held it up to the light and read:

"You told me to let you know if there was anything new. There is nothing new except that they're going to have one of their concerts to-morrow, but I think you might

as well know that Annie is beginning to look a trifle knocked up; she takes much less food than usual. Hadn't I better tell her that the Prince is up and pretty nearly all right? I do think we have kept her in the dark long enough."

Just then there was a pause in the concert, a quarter of an hour's respite from the sonatas, generally devoted to ices and lemonade. Several more groups appeared on the verandah as Annie stuffed the piece of paper into her pocket.

CHAPTER XX.

IN THE RIVER HOUSE.

MRS. BRAND had not attended the concert—these occasions were too festive for her taste—but neither had she gone to bed. From some remark dropped by Tom she had gathered that the Principe's appearance this evening was not unlikely, and now she sat up waiting, for it was just possible that Annie might have something to tell her before going to bed. She spent the hours in trying to make up her mind whether the news would make her happy or wretched. Not since the day when she had first seen Luigi, knowing him to be Annie's destined husband, had she been in such trepidation as to-night. To be led into the presence of her own elected bridegroom would have been far less agitating; for little Mrs. Brand had never taken much account of herself, and had never succeeded in regarding events which touched her person alone as being of paramount importance. When, twenty years ago, Tom had ordered her to marry him, she had, of course, complied without a word of protest, being far too terrified to realise what her feelings in the matter were. By the time she had recovered from the edge of the fright she discovered that she was deeply attached to her husband, as in all probability she would have become deeply attached to almost any sort of husband, and the marriage had turned out quite as happy as that of most people, although since they had become

"people of the world" and Tom had begun to develop new ideas her old terror of him had been slightly on the increase. The strict orders, for instance, which she had received about reminding him to wash his hands before meals or of the proper way of using his knife at table were a source of chronic alarm. She was frightened to remind him, and she was frightened of his reproaches for not reminding him. She knew, too, that attention to these things was necessary for Tom—far more necessary for Tom than for her, who, being so small and unobtrusive, passed muster for a lady far more easily than he for a gentleman.

While she sat and waited for the end of the concert her thoughts went back continually to that first glimpse of Luigi. It had turned out far better than she had dared to hope. The sight of the man who, not knowing it, held Annie's destiny in his hand, had had an unaccountably quieting effect upon her mother's heart. Her instinct told her that he was worthy of gaining her child's love. But had he gained it? Upon this point she was not clear.

The handle of the door turned unexpectedly, and Annie, in her white lace dress, came in, holding a crumpled paper in her hand. She came straight up to her mother and held the paper towards her.

"Read this, mother," she said, apparently quite quietly, "and then tell me whether it is true."

Mrs. Brand looked from the paper to her daughter's face and then back again at the paper, then she took it in bewilderment. As she read she began to tremble, though she could not yet understand what was coming.

"Is it true?" said Annie, standing upright beside the chair.

"Is what true?" asked the poor woman, feebly.

"This story—this plot between my father and the Principessa. Is it true that I have been bargained for and

sold by those two? That my husband was chosen for me while I was still at Miss Bellew's? Do not deny everything, please, mother. That note shows that they have a secret understanding. You must know something of it. The note is almost enough, but not quite. I want you to tell me. The truth, mother—let me have the truth."

Mrs. Brand was shaking now as people shake in the cold fit of a fever. All the little colour she ever had in her face had vanished from it. She clutched the arm of the chair, as though she were on the point of fainting. But Annie seemed to notice nothing. There was no pity either in her face or voice as she said again, more impatiently:

"The truth, mother; you know quite well that I must have the truth!"

Mrs. Brand looked into her child's face as though imploring mercy. "The truth, the truth!" it echoed in her own heart. Yes, the truth—but Tom? This time she very nearly fainted in earnest at the thought of what she was doing, and yet it was the mother who had already conquered the wife.

"I will tell you the truth," she said, almost inaudibly.

And, in a feeble, rambling fashion, she told her all she knew. Sometimes Annie interrupted with a question and then followed up her thought aloud:

"And so that was why my education was considered complete? Yes, I see. And I was taken to the river house to meet him, of course, and the blue dress was more likely to fascinate him than the grey one. I see, I see! It all tallies wonderfully! It was all a game from the beginning—yes, now at least I do believe. And you, too, mother, were against me."

She stood for a minute in silence, feeling as though the

shame and consternation of the discovery must press her to the ground.

Mrs. Brand cowered a little before her daughter's eyes. There was a knife in her heart. She had told the whole truth, and there was nothing more which she dared to say.

"She told me that I was a simpleton, and now I see it. I took it all for genuine. I believed that it was God who had led us together; I believed that it was his heart that had chosen me, and that I loved him as he loved me—but it was all false. I have been cheated!"

There was a break in Annie's voice, and Mrs. Brand looked into her face and saw that she was crying.

"But you do love him, child?" she cried, almost joyfully, and stretched her meagre little arms towards her daughter.

"No, I do not," said Annie, fiercely drying her eyes. "I only imagined I did. It is my imagination that has been worked upon, not my heart. The effects were calculated—I see it now. And, after all, it is only natural that I should have been put a little off my balance and have got my ideas somewhat mixed up. Don't you see that it is the natural, logical consequence of all this? But this is not real love; I have only been tricked into believing it so. Don't you see what I mean, mother?"

Mrs. Brand's arms had sunk down again.

"Of course you should know better," she said, with a little sigh of bewilderment. "You've studied logic at Miss Bellew's, and I never was good at reasoning."

When Annie went on to prove to her the fallacy of her theory she said no word of contradiction, but sat by silent—silent and unconvinced.

On leaving her mother's room Annie had already made up her mind what to do, but not as to the manner in which to do it. It was in the middle of the night that Luigi's

parting words to her suddenly came back to her memory :
"Come to the river house to-morrow."

"Yes," said Annie aloud in the dark, "I will go to the river house." And, her resolution being formed, she was able to fall asleep.

Towards five o'clock on the following afternoon Rankin was told to prepare the basket of provisions. Annie had spent the forenoon in her room, in dread of meeting Teresina. She understood now that even yesterday she had been frightened of her all day, but to-day she felt that the sight of her would be unbearable. It was the fear of Teresina that made her choose the back staircase for leaving the Curhaus. She did not feel safe until she had gained the river bed, and, looking behind her, saw the road clear.

Even as it was she could not quite rid herself of Teresina. All the time that she laboured along the stony path strewn with sulphur-coloured pebbles, a shadow that was Teresina seemed to be moving over the stones beside her and talking in her ear; while on the other side, and talking into her other ear, moved another shadow, which she knew to be Ellen. What they said sounded like the answer to the one doubt which was still torturing her. During the night and during the forenoon she had, point by point, gone through all the events of the last six weeks, and a new and fearful question had arisen. Teresina had said : "It is a plot between your father and his mother"; but she also had said : "It is your fortune he wants, but it is *me* he loves." Was not that the same as saying that he was acting with his eyes open? To herself she denied it indignantly, but she felt that she could not bear the doubt for long. She would know all now in a few minutes; and meanwhile Teresina on the right hand kept on saying into her ear, "It is *me* he loves," and on the left Ellen sneered,

"At least he will have a plausible excuse for making you believe that he cares for you."

The river house was empty except for the *bambino*, exactly as it had been on the day when she had first visited it. She left Rankin beside the cradle and wandered away into the adjoining spaces. They could not exactly be called rooms, for the house had obviously been built about three-quarters too large for the wants of its owner, and therefore was more granary than anything else—granaries in which next to nothing was garnered; empty, damp spaces where the human voice had an unpleasantly hollow sound, with sometimes a heap of withered maize-leaves lying in one corner, and a broken sickle or wheelbarrow in another. One of the windows was darkened by an overhanging roof of mulberry branches that had once been green, no doubt, but had long since grown brown and rustling, and under which heads of maize were drying in rows.

Annie went restlessly from one space to the other; there were no doors to open, and it was easier to move than to keep still. She was telling herself now that if only that terrible doubt was settled she could quite well bear all the rest. Nothing seemed of importance now, except that one doubt.

A quarter of an hour passed and Luigi was not yet come. She remembered that his injured ankle would retard his progress on the rough road. There might be a long time yet to wait. Sitting down upon an overturned wheelbarrow, she buried her face in her hands. She had scarcely done so when she heard a maize-leaf crackle, and, looking up, saw Luigi entering. Immediately she got up, and without waiting for him to say a word she began to speak.

"I have found out all," she said, with heaving breast. "We have been tricked and cheated. It has all been a

plot from the beginning. It is not our hearts that have brought us together, but the will of our parents. Do not stop me; let me speak. There were consultations and arrangements before we came—you were sent for and I was sent for. I did not then know why I was sent for, but now I know it—I was told last night. I was sent for to meet you."

"I don't understand you," said Luigi, in a tone that expressed only boundless wonder.

"It was an understanding between your mother and my father. We met here in this house, but not by chance—do not think so. I understand at last why I had to go along this stony road and why I had to gather so many pink flowers. I understand a quantity of things now that I did not understand before. I know why your mother liked me to sit beside her. Perhaps you know it too?" an impulse pushed her bitterly to add, and then she broke off and looked at him with dilated eyes and flying breath.

Luigi was still lost in amazement pure and simple.

"But why should they do all this?" he said after a long pause, speaking as a man might who has received a blow upon his head. "I think you must be mistaken. My mother has got much more ambitious ideas; she has always wanted me to marry a great heiress."

"But I *am* a great heiress!"

He looked at her, still with those dazed eyes.

"An heiress?"

"My father has hundreds of thousands of pounds. He has earned them himself. He was a workman, and I am his only child."

"And my mother knew this?"

"She knew everything."

Luigi put his hand to his head and then let it drop again. There was another silence, much longer than the

first. He was not looking at Annie now, but was staring at the ground in front of him, fixedly and intently. It was as though the five past weeks had become a concrete object which in his memory he was rapidly passing in review. Annie, watching him, saw his brown skin fade suddenly to what in another man would have been a deadly pallor. The truth had burst upon him at last. One of the muscles in his cheek began to work. Seeing it, Annie remembered having seen it twitch in exactly this same strange way on the day when Daniel Silberherz had forced his way into the Monastero. She was still saying this to herself when he began again to speak, in a voice which she had never yet heard. They were words of rage. This she knew by the tint of his face even more than by the vehemence of his gestures, but only rarely did she understand the words themselves, for he was speaking in his mother-tongue, with which only now and then there mingled the fragment of an English phrase.

"So that was it, *madre*; that was it," he repeated, in these new and unknown tones, pacing the earthen floor of the granary from wall to wall while the scattered maize-leaves crackled like paper under his feverish tread. "Your *finezza*—yes, I always said that your *finezza* was too much for me. Yes; but for all that you have not caught me. I am a man. We have done with each other, *madre mia*. You tried this once before. Cleverly done—truly very cleverly done—but not quite cleverly enough!"

He never stopped moving for an instant; but for this physical outlet it seemed as though his rage must have choked him. Once he struck the wall beside him with his open palm and with all his strength; seeing a sickle at his feet, he stooped, picked it up, wrenched the blade from the handle, and hurled the two pieces down again upon the earthen floor. He did not seem to know what he was do-

ing, nor where he was. At everything he looked with the same glance—at the walls, at the floor, at the scared Annie, at the unresponsive wheelbarrow. His voice, rolling about in the big empty space, had an awful, unnatural sound, and awoke strange, shrill echoes in the musty corners.

Annie stood against the wall, trembling from head to foot in a fear that was almost purely physical. At the first outburst of his fury she had instinctively made a step backwards. Had she been asked five minutes ago whether she had ever seen a man in anger she would have answered, "Yes;" but now she knew that everything else had been child's play. She was terrified at what she had done, but she could not repent having done it, for in the very teeth of the terror there had already risen a great and unspeakable relief. In proportion as this fury was alarming it was also unmistakably genuine. This was a man really angry—not one cleverly emulating anger. That meant that the doubt was settled. He was as innocent as she was of any part in the plot. He was a victim, not a conspirator, and "the Roman girl" had lied.

It was her great frightened eyes, following him about in his restless walk, that at length arrested him. All at once, with a shock of surprise, he realised her presence. He walked on for a few paces more slowly and then stood still, evidently labouring to regain some mastery over himself. It was a minute or two before he said, unsteadily, but with the first traces of returning self-control:

"I have frightened you—forgive me. I forget everything at these times. I am a madman!"

Annie could only smile as unsteadily as he had spoken; she could not yet speak. She knew that at this moment only one word would be required to make the day end, after all, in the way that she had believed it would end last night when he had pressed her hand at parting. She was ready

to speak the word. She could forgive everything now that the doubt was settled. But could he?

"I have behaved like a child," Luigi was saying, in a much lower tone. "Instead of wasting our time we should be consulting. Of course we are both of one mind. Neither you nor I can ever allow ourselves to be made puppets of, even by our parents. Is it not true?"

Annie roused herself with an effort. "Quite true," she said, with shaking lips. She knew now that the moment was past in which everything might yet have come right.

"We must assert our independence. You will have to refuse obedience to your father. For me it will be simplest if I cut short my leave and go straight back to the regiment. That will break off everything at once, and destroy at one blow any hopes they may still cling to for the success of their plot. Great heavens, that this summer should have been such a comedy!"

His voice rose again abruptly, and the angry light leapt back into his eyes. He walked from one side of the space to the other in silence, struggling with himself. After the second turn he stood still and asked:

"Tell me this—how did you learn the truth?"

"It was a stranger who told me. A girl who comes from Rome. I do not know her name. It was she who came out on the verandah last night."

"Ha! Teresina Bazzanella! To be sure, I saw her face last night; she was there. Ah, so it was Teresina, was it? I know her well; her eyes are very black. I used even once to believe——"

He broke into an excited laugh. "Teresina is here; that is not such a bad idea; perhaps even a better idea than going back to the regiment. There are different ways of asserting one's independence, are there not? Why not choose a pleasant one?"

He laughed again, and Annie looked at him with a new apprehension. She could not grasp the meaning of his wild words, and his laughter touched her more disagreeably than his rage had done. She went towards the door, for it had occurred to her that there was no more reason for her staying here. Luigi followed her in silence and in front of the river-house they parted without any further word. There was nothing more to say. At the last moment, indeed, Annie put out her hand, for, after all, they were not parting as enemies. Were they not of one mind in their indignation, of one mind in their resolve not to be unworthily used?

But the two hands were withdrawn, having scarcely touched each other, and they turned and went their ways abruptly, she towards the one side of the valley, and he towards the other.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE STONE BENCH ON THE PIAZZA.

HAVING reached the Monastero, Luigi went straight to his mother, not, indeed, to provoke a scene with her—a scene was what he wanted to avoid, since after the past interview with Annie he had seen that he could not trust himself—but in order to make everything clear. It was this thought alone that filled his mind, for in the first ecstasy of his rage he had lost sight even of his love.

In the moment that the Principessa saw his face she knew what had happened. He did not speak till he was standing close beside her.

“I have come only to tell you that I know everything,” he said, scarcely above a whisper. “If you love me, do not reply to any word that I may say. I beg of you, by your mother’s heart, to be silent. I am frightened of what might be. I know everything; let that be enough. Every single word you could reply would only make the evil greater. I understand now perfectly why the Signor Brand’s manners did not disturb you. You planned this marriage for me. You planned another marriage for me two years ago. I told you then that I should marry a wife of my choosing, not of yours; do you remember? She knows everything too. I have just come from her. We have sworn to each other not to submit to this unworthiness. I am going now, and, listen well, *madre*, I am going to Teresina Bazzanella,

or to whomsoever I want. I have been in leading-strings all the summer, though I did not know it; but I have broken them now. Good-bye, *madre*; I can only thank God that I have not cursed you."

He turned and went some steps towards the door. The Principessa's sorrowful eyes followed him, but she made no attempt to speak. Long, long ago had she learnt for the sake of Luigi to restrain her own impetuous temper—a temper that had once been as impetuous as his own. The contrast between the fiery eyes and the austere mouth told the tale plainly enough.

"When I am tired of Teresina," said Luigi, standing still once more, "I shall go back to the regiment. It is lucky that I have got a place to go to; only a few days ago it looked as though even this refuge were to be cut off. My lieutenant's star has had a close shave, truly. If it had not been——"

He broke off abruptly, and a look of panic came into his face. Once more he came back and stood beside his mother's chair.

"Those three banknotes," he said, in a choking voice. "It cannot be, *madre*. Tell me, where did you get them from? I never believed that you got them for your lava ornaments. Tell me the truth; did you get them from Mr. Brand? No, don't tell me; that is enough. I don't think I could bear more to-day."

With one long look he turned and almost ran out of the room.

When in after-days the Principessa heard anyone speaking of a "broken heart," she would smile and shake her white head. She knew very well that if human hearts were breakable hers would have broken at the moment when, with that look in his eyes, her son had gone from her.

That evening after dinner Annie went down to the Cur-

salon. It had occurred to her that if she kept entirely hidden "the Roman girl" might think she was unhappy, and the idea was distasteful to her. She had spoken to no one since her return from the river-house. It had, indeed, been in her mind to go to her father and to tell him everything, but after the meeting with Luigi she no longer felt strong enough for this. She would wait till he spoke first; meanwhile her resistance should be entirely passive.

The guests who had dined at the *table d'hôte* were almost all assembled in the Cursalon when Annie came downstairs, for the evenings had grown somewhat too chilly to be enjoyed out of doors. The first thing she saw on entering the room was Prince Roccatelli standing with his back to the wall and negligently fanning Teresina Bazzanella, who laughed up into his face, with her exquisite white teeth flashing in the gaslight. It was even harder to believe her eyes than it had been when yesterday at this hour she had first caught sight of him here. The looks of those around her first recalled her to her senses, and then only she became aware that she had been standing rooted to the spot, devouring with her eyes the couple over there, without any attempt to disguise her boundless astonishment. She turned with bewildered senses and burning cheeks, and found that Bernegg was beside her. At this moment the sight of him irritated her even more than usual. What she wanted just then was to sit in some quiet corner, where, unobserved herself, she might observe what was going on over there. Even with Bernegg talking airy nonsense beside her, she could only with an effort take her eyes off that other couple. She could not help still fancying that there must be some mistake; it could not really be meant so. She could understand why Luigi should bow distantly both to her father and herself, even that he should avoid coming near her she could understand, but what was going on over

there over-passed her horizon. He had, indeed, been in a strange humour this afternoon, and had spoken many wild words; but the sense of them had not reached the understanding of one who knew as little of the ways of men as did Annie Brand.

Sometimes she told herself that it must be a mere chance that Luigi should be sitting beside Teresina; in five minutes he would probably be sitting beside somebody else. Then for a space she would carefully refrain from turning her eyes towards the fatal corner of the room, but when with a tightening in her throat she looked across once more nothing was changed. Once only she saw the corner empty, and looked about her with a quick up-leaping of hope. To see him talking with any other woman would have been no pain, but rather pleasure. She was frightened of no one but "the Roman girl." But the hope sunk again as rapidly as it had risen, for Luigi and Teresina, still in lively conversation, were moving about among the groups scattered throughout the room, exchanging occasional greetings, but apparently holding conversation only with each other. Another time she saw Teresina standing alone, but scarcely had she realised this when already Luigi was by her side with a glass of lemonade. Even across the room Annie could see the radiant smile with which she took it from his hand.

On the following evening, and on the next again, events repeated themselves. Annie began to notice some of her own astonishment reflected upon the faces around her, and she saw, or thought she saw, pitying glances turned upon her. Luigi seemed to avoid her even more ostentatiously than at first; never even by chance did his glance turn in her direction. Could this mean anger against herself? What had become of the friendly understanding on which they had parted at the door of the river-house? Surely the

fact of their having been cheated in common need not make them into enemies.

Now at last her faith began to totter. Bewilderment had possession of her. Turn where she would there was Teresina's triumphant face, apparently courting her gaze, with the offensively black eyes and the impertinently scarlet lips. "It is *me* he loves—it is *me, me, me*," both lips and eyes seemed for ever to be saying, and little by little she began to believe their tale. After all, he had never told her in so many words that he loved her; and even had he done so, and done so in good faith, might that idea not have been a mere passing fancy, as unreal as her own supposed love for him, and which the sight of the woman whom he truly loved had swept aside for ever? The more she reflected upon it, the more likely did this appear to Annie's schoolgirl inexperience.

But it was not Annie alone who was puzzled. When Mr. Brand had looked on for two days he set out to ask for an explanation at the only place where he supposed he could get it—the Monastero. Mrs. Brand saw him depart with much inward quaking, and during the three hours that he was away she looked only at the door and listened only for his footstep. Many footsteps passed the door, but it was late in the afternoon before the right one came. It came in haste, and the door was opened so noisily that the poor little woman instinctively covered her face with her hands in order not to see Thomas's furious face. She heard him fling his hat upon the table and then sink on to a chair, breathing heavily, having evidently crossed the valley at a tremendous pace.

"Tell your maid to pack up your things," were the first words he said, and in quite a different tone from the one she had expected; "we leave this place to-morrow. It's been a failure; but never mind, Polly, we'll do it yet!"

Mrs. Brand, still disbelieving her ears, yet ventured to look up. Thomas was obviously excited, but obviously also the excitement was not one of anger, or not of anger alone. There was even something of triumph in his grey eye, and in the words that now began to pour from his lips the presence of self-satisfaction was unmistakable. He had left her silent and grim, he had returned flushed, boisterous, and more voluble than she had known him for months.

"I said it all along. I knew all this tomfoolery could only end one way, and that's just what it's done. But she never would believe that my plan was better than hers, because I'm a workman, forsooth, and she a princess. Pooh! as though there were not plenty more princesses on the market to be had for such prices as I can pay. This prince isn't for sale, she says. Well, then, let him go starve, in the name of all the d——'s, and I'll buy me another. Why, I'm Thomas Brand, ain't I, able to outbid all comers? Never you mind, Polly—Mary, I mean. I swear that you'll have a prince for a son-in-law yet, in spite of all the grand ladies in this country or in any other."

He was leaning back now with his waistcoat displayed and his hands deep in his pockets. Mrs. Brand understood nothing at all. Undoubtedly Tom was angry, but also he seemed to be glad about something or other. She did not know that within the last hour he had freed himself from a burden which had pressed upon him for months, and that only now he was beginning to be conscious of a strange feeling of relief. All through the summer he had carried about with him a secret grudge against the woman whose influence he had felt himself unable to escape; all through the summer his sullen workman's pride had been upon the rack. To-day in the indignation of his disappointment he had succeeded in freeing himself, and the self-respect which had begun to droop sprung up with a bound in all its old

strength. His plans were shattered, but he could breathe again. For a man with the instincts of a tyrant the subjection had been all the more humiliating, as the taste of regained liberty was all the more irresistible. To himself he seemed to be overturning the altar before which he had worshipped all the summer, and with a wild, rebellious joy to be stamping into the dust that beautiful, silver-haired, ivory-featured idol in whom he had thought to recognise the impersonation of his ambition, and whose charm had held him for so long as in a net. What exactly had passed between her husband and the Principessa Mrs. Brand did not know, but even in after-days when she happened to think of that interview she used instinctively to begin to tremble.

When he had done talking, which was not for some time, Mrs. Brand did what was probably the most heroic act of her life—she stammered out a protest against leaving the place next day. The truth was that hope was not yet quite dead within her, in spite of everything—in spite even of Annie's logic. So long as Annie and Luigi were still in one place everything might yet come right. While Thomas talked she was screwing up her courage to gain at least a few days' respite.

"I do not think that Rankin can pack up all our things to-day, Thomas," she began in mortal terror. "Would it not do as well if we left the day after? It is such very short notice, you see, and more particularly with this dance to-night, which surely you do not want Annie to miss. Our dresses, you see, would have to stay out, in any case. Perhaps you forgot about the dance, Thomas."

Mr. Brand had been on the point of leaving the room. He now stood still near the door and looked back at his wife in undisguised astonishment. The possibility of Polly venturing to contradict his commands had not before occurred to him.

"If your dresses have to stay out," he said, shortly, "that only means that Rankin will have to stay up so much longer. I've told you that we start to-morrow morning."

Mrs. Brand squeezed one of her hands tightly within the other and forced her lips to open again.

"But after dancing half the night, won't it be a little tiring for Annie——"

She got no further than this, for Mr. Brand's face had become dark red.

"We start to-morrow morning," he said again as before. "There are beds at Terrente, I suppose. Annie can sleep there as much as she needs, but this is the last night that we spend here—mind that."

Then he went out without another word. She knew that he was angry with her, but she knew also that she would hear no more of it. He never did either say or do much on these occasions. Perhaps he dimly felt that he was too big and she too small to let a scene between them appear rational. It did not seem worth the huge man's while to put himself into a rage with anything so incon-siderable.

Mrs. Brand got up to look for Rankin, but then she remembered that Rankin had gone out with Annie an hour ago. They would be back presently, no doubt.

Annie was not far off. She had been only a little way up one of the side valleys, and was now returning through the village. The small round paving-stones, of the sort popularly known as "cats' skulls," made walking a doubtful pleasure, and Annie, with Rankin by her side, moved along somewhat listlessly. She was thinking of the dance to-night, but not with any pleasure. To miss it would mean being talked about, but she kept desperately hoping that something would happen to prevent it. It could only mean another long evening of that spectacle which had become

so hateful to her—though why it should be so, since she had proved to herself that her love for this man had only been a trickery of the imagination, she was not able to explain—a longer evening than any of the others, varied by the annoyance of attempting to keep at bay that other lieutenant who was so strangely persistent. Three days ago, when this dance had first been planned, he had asked her for the cotillon, and she had only escaped saying “Yes” by telling him that she meant to retire early. She supposed she must either do this or else grant him his wish.

She was thinking of all this as she slowly passed through the little humpbacked streets, where brilliant glimpses of the distant vineyards were to be caught here and there through some tall narrow slit between two houses. All the streets opened on to the irregular piazza in the centre of the village. It was close to the old mulberry tree, with the stone bench beneath it, that Annie happened to emerge to-day, the same bench on which, a few days ago, Teresina had invited Mrs. Brand to rest. To-day there were two people sitting on the bench with their backs towards her—Teresina and Luigi Roccattelli. Annie recognised them both the instant that she was free of the narrow street. There was no one else near, neither the Contessa Ardilion or any other of Teresina’s acquaintances, which in itself was a glaring disregard of Italian etiquette. And yet Teresina showed no dread of being seen. When a woman passed by with a water-pail she did not draw back into the shade of the mulberry branches. To judge from her lively words and rippling laughter the spot seemed to be scarcely public enough for her taste.

In order to cross the piazza Annie had no choice but to pass straight in front of the bench. She did so with a steady step, though the houses were dancing on both sides. Luigi bowed stiffly. Teresina looked at her unblushingly

and smiled, and Annie looked back at Teresina and also smiled. Thinking of it afterwards, she felt surprised and even rather pleased with herself because of that smile. The only question that weighed on her mind was whether her face had not been either very red or very white. It pleased her also to remember that while still in full sight of the bench she had turned to Rankin with some question about her dress for this evening. She did not know why she did it, and felt only that something must be done. While Rankin was giving a rather elaborate answer she was surprised by her young mistress abruptly exclaiming:

"Yes, I'll do it!"

"Do you mean, Miss, that you'll take the red sash?"

"No, not the sash, Rankin," said Annie, almost gaily, "something else."

It had come to her like an inspiration that she would give the cotillon to Bernegg. Why not, indeed? If *he* were able to enjoy himself, why not she? And Bernegg was the very person she wanted. What a simpleton she had been all along! The instrument had been lying ready to her hand, and she had pushed it aside instead of grasping it. But now it should be different.

She reached the Curhaus with her mind made up, and was met with the news that the boxes must be packed immediately, since their departure was fixed for next morning.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE END OF THE SEASON.

WHILE completing the arrangement of his moustache before the mirror that evening, Lieutenant Bernegg was unusually thoughtful. Miss Brand had, at the last moment, granted him the cotillon. The situation was pleasant, but it required to be reviewed. For more than a week past the cautious butterfly had been judiciously but vainly fluttering round this flower—in itself an almost unprecedented thing—and at last the flower seemed to be yielding; and, not only this, but it turned out to be a flower made of solid British gold, for within the last few days a rumour of Mr. Brand's enormous fortune had been circulating in the Curhaus. The discovery lifted a weight from the lieutenant's soul. He had begun to suspect himself of taking this flirtation a trifle, just a trifle, too seriously. Under ordinary circumstances this would, of course, have been foolish, but there could be nothing foolish in taking seriously such an heiress as Miss Brand turned out to be. He began to ask himself whether so wonderful a chance as this would be likely ever to occur again. And then, as for the future, there would probably be nothing to prevent his fluttering on again should he happen to get tired of sitting still for so long. He was rather pensive when he went down to the *table d'hôte*. The immediate future unrolled all sorts of pleasant prospects before his mind's eye. His

days would now, doubtless, be more agreeably occupied than within the past week, when he had actually been reduced to taking iron baths merely *pour passer le temps*, as he pathetically observed.

The dining-room to-day presented an even gayer scene than usual. Many a dazzling frock that had been lying by, waiting for such an opportunity as this, came to light this evening, and everyone who possessed an ornament seemed to have put it on. Mimi and Lili Kruger were dressed entrancingly in the tenderest of sky-blues, and Teresina Bazzanella, who had nothing better than the black lace dress which her godmother had given her two years ago, had tied round her neck a ribbon that was redder than her own lips. Annie, too, had taken particular interest in her toilet to-night, and had even borrowed one of her mother's diamond stars to set off her white silk dinner dress. She knew that the glittering stones in her hair made her more beautiful than she had ever looked before, and the knowledge brought colour to her cheek and light to her eye. She was almost happy in the thought of outshining Teresina.

Dinner was finished somewhat hurriedly. Herr Plenn had disappeared some time before the dessert. It was on his willing shoulders, of course, that the arrangements for the evening reposed.

The interval between the last spoonful that was swallowed and the first chord of dance music struck upon the grand piano was filled by an expectant pause. Some of the ladies hastened to their rooms to give some finishing touch to their toilet, or to cast a last look in the mirror. Presently the room began to fill. Annie had gone upstairs to fetch her mother. Mrs. Brand was sitting in the middle of the room, loaded with all her diamonds and bathed in a perspiration of alarm. It had been by her

husband's strict orders that she had emptied every one of her *étuis* to-night.

"Mind you don't keep a single stone dark," had been his injunction. "It's been bad enough to have to hold them back all summer, and to go on pretending that we're not better off than other people, but at least we'll go off with a flash in the pan."

"Quick, mother, or we'll miss the first waltz!" said Annie, entering.

"Tell me, child, is—is—is—*he* to be here to-night?" stammered the mother.

Annie was settling her hair before the glass.

"Is who to be here? Lieutenant Bernegg? Yes, of course. Didn't I tell you that I had given him the cotillon? What! you are still sitting, mother? Don't you know that the music has already begun? The first waltz, mother, the first waltz!" and she hurried the small, red satin figure out of the room and down the staircase.

Mrs. Brand looked at her daughter once or twice, as though to assure herself that this was indeed Annie. To be sure, it was her first real ball, and perhaps the knowledge that she would be the queen of it had gone to her head, but somehow this particular form of high spirits did not seem like Annie.

The first waltz had begun when they entered the room. On the balcony above, the lookers-on—consisting of the semi-invalids and of the people who had no dresses to wear—were already installed. Festoons of scarlet vine-leaves decorated the windows, and hung in brilliant loops from the candelabra. Everybody seemed a little excited. This dance signified the farewell to the season, but it also signified a good many other farewells, as well as the failure of some projects and the disappointment of some hopes, which the season had proved itself too short to mature. The Brands'

travelling trunks were not the only ones which stood ready packed upstairs, and despite the chatter and laughter on all sides there were many troubled hearts in the Cursalon this evening, and some pairs of eyes to which the tears stood very near. •

But Annie Brand's gaiety showed no signs of forsaking her. Lieutenant Bernegg had been most agreeably surprised by the smile with which his first word had been answered ; and as the evening advanced, and waltz and quadrille followed upon each other, this pleasant surprise increased, as did also the astonishment of the company at large. No movement of Annie's could to-night escape general attention, for she was not only the queen of the ball, but also the newly unmasked heiress who bore upon her the reflection of all her mother's diamonds and all her father's gold. The new and fierce light which beat to-day upon her every gesture revealed that her encouragement of the lieutenant was given in so downright a fashion as to appear even rather offensive to some more experienced coquettes. Those who had witnessed the events of the last weeks had not to seek far for the reason of her line of conduct—only about as far as the breadth of the room, on the other side of which the Principe Roccattelli was generally to be seen by the side of Teresina Bazzanella—and her motive, too, had their full approval, but almost every woman in the room could have given her a lesson as to the manner of doing the thing. There was such a pitiable want of subtlety about it all as to set the teeth of some of the more fastidious on edge. There could be no doubt that those *Inglesi* had much too thorough a way of doing things.

Annie guessed nothing of the remarks around her, and scarcely noticed the glances. The knowledge of her impending departure had made her well-nigh reckless. It could not matter what conclusions either Bernegg or the

lookers-on gathered from her demeanour, since to-morrow at break of day she would be gone from this hateful place for ever. With this before her eyes she felt free to encourage him without restraint.

And yet, through it all, she could not feel-certain that the one person in the room for whom the display was intended had even actually taken cognizance of it. Not one of the glances which she stole across the room found Luigi's face turned towards her. He did not seem to be talking much himself, but appeared so engrossed in his companion's talk as to have lost sight of his surroundings.

It was late in the evening when for the first time Annie discovered that his eyes were upon her. The cotillon, that is the climax of the entertainment, had been going on for some time under the indefatigable direction of Herr Plenn. Owing to the short notice given no very imposing preparations had been possible; there were no paper hoops here through which the gentlemen would have had to jump like circus poodles, no giant butterfly wings to be fastened to the ladies' shoulders, none of those elaborate figures which make the delight of Vienna ball-rooms. Though the Bajazzo had done his best, he had been forced to be far less ambitious. A lady placed at one end of the room, a group of gentlemen at the other, a ball thrown by the lady and caught by the nimblest of the gentlemen; again, a lady sitting on a chair with a *cocarde* in her hand and three gentlemen led up to her, her choice of the one she wished to dance with being marked by the bestowing of the *cocarde*—of these and similar harmless little jokes did Herr Plenn's programme consist.

Annie threw the ball straight at Bernegg when it came to her turn. When, a few minutes later, she was sitting on the chair with the *cocarde* in her hand, Bernegg was again one of the three men who were placed before her—not by chance, for Herr Plenn, having noticed that the lieu-

tenant was in favour, and being good-natured, thought it only kind to give him these extra chances. Without any hesitation Annie handed him the green *cocarde*, and then, as she rose from her chair, instinctively looked in Luigi's direction. This time she met his eyes full, but immediately turned away. She thought that she knew now for certain that he hated her.

The cotillon was nearing its end when once more Annie was led to the chair in the centre and a small mirror placed in her hand, not for the purpose of looking at her own face, but at those of the dancers who in turn were brought up from behind, the unsuitable ones being dismissed by her passing her lace handkerchief across the mirror. Several had already retired discomfited, when suddenly the fussy Signor Molinetti made a spring towards the Bajazzo and, with a series of knowing winks, whispered something in his ear. Annie looked again into the mirror, and saw there a face which she had not seen so near since the day when she stood in the empty granary of the river-house. It looked older than she remembered it, and seemed to her even paler than it had been an hour ago. For a few seconds she stared into the mirror without moving; then she remembered where she was, and, conscious of the eyes around her, passed her handkerchief rapidly over the glass with the gesture of a petulant child, and a shake of the head that seemed to say as plainly as in words: "Not this one, at any price; any other rather than this one!" Instantly the face disappeared, and a fragment of a laugh was heard among the spectators. It had not been Signor Molinetti alone who had thought that it would be rather good fun to see what would come of the experiment.

Within the same minute the music had struck up again, and Annie was waltzing past the spectators on Lieutenant Bernegg's arm.

The looking-glass figure was followed by a somewhat lengthy pause. Nobody seemed quite certain of what was going to happen next, though to all appearances Herr Plenn still held something in reserve, for he had called upon the gentlemen to follow him into the small room across the passage which had been serving him as a hiding-place for his surprises, and whose threshold no foot save his own had as yet been allowed to cross. The velvet seats were deserted of all save the mammas and papas, for, before leading off the gentlemen, Herr Plenn had placed all the young ladies in a half-circle at the further end of the room. Most of them looked expectantly towards the doorway; a few were talking with their neighbours. Annie, standing at about the middle of the half-circle, discovered that Teresina was beside her. It was the first time since the beginning of the evening that they had happened to be so near each other. Teresina turned with a radiant face towards her companion.

"It is a beautiful ball, is it not?" she asked, with dancing eyes.

She would have made the same remark to anyone else who chanced to be standing near her. At that moment it made no difference to her whether she was talking to Annie or to anyone else. The ball really was such a beautiful ball to her that for the present she was conscious of nothing but an intense enjoyment, for Teresina's nature belonged to the sort which is capable of being intoxicated by such things as waltz music, and gaslight, and even gaudy colouring. She clung to Luigi with every fibre of her perverse and obstinate nature, and yet such surroundings as these were capable of heightening her delight in his neighbourhood to an almost incalculable degree, and making her for the moment quite regardless of the issue that might yet be to come. Her love stood on a base foundation, but the impressionability of her

nerves saved her from the yet lower and coarser depths into which such natures as hers are for ever in danger of sinking.

"Yes, it is a beautiful ball," replied Annie readily, and then for a moment she was on the point of telling Teresina of her impending departure. But she quickly changed her mind, for she saw no reason for giving Teresina pleasure, and of course this news would please her. She made, instead, some further remark about the ball to which Teresina replied, still radiantly. Meanwhile the music had struck up again, and through the open door of the Cursalon an army of dancers poured in, headed by the triumphant Herr Plenn and armed with bouquets of late autumn flowers. A murmur of approbation was heard on all sides. This had been the *arrangeur's* jealously guarded secret, the final effect which was to form a fitting close both to the cotillon and to the season. Nor had it been easy of execution, for the flower-beds were getting bare by this time, and it was only by ransacking every garden for a mile or two around, and stripping the very flower-pots in the windows of the village street, that the Bajazzo had succeeded in furnishing each gentleman with a farewell gift to his partner. The effect, however, was all that could be desired; even the lookers-on who still lingered on the balcony came near to overbalancing themselves in their endeavour to get a perfect view of the proceedings below. Each knight with his brilliant bunch in his hand was looking anxiously about for his rightful damosel, for no one wanted to play the laggard in this tournament of gallantry.

Annie and Teresina were still exchanging remarks when they became aware of their two partners coming towards them, each with a bunch of red carnations in his hand, for in this country of carnations it had been these brilliant blossoms which had formed Herr Plenn's principal harvest.

Bernegg, who was a few steps in advance, had barely reached the spot where the girls were standing when Luigi sprang forward.

"That lady is my partner," he said, and as he spoke his nostrils dilated and all the blood left his face. "You have got no right to give your flowers to her."

He did not speak loudly, but so rapidly that the words almost strangled him, and Annie saw that the muscles in his cheek were working.

Bernegg turned towards him in surprise.

"It is to my partner that I mean to give the flowers," he said, without any excitement, "not to yours. My flowers are for Miss Brand."

"That is a lie. I say that you mean to give them to the Signora Bazzanella, and I will not suffer it." And with a rapid, unexpected movement he took the bunch of carnations out of Bernegg's hand and flung it straight into his face.

It had happened far too quickly for anyone to interfere, and owing to the music and the waltzing couples the incident had only been noticed by those close at hand. Signor Molinetti, however, was always close at hand. Before another word had been spoken the old gentleman had taken Luigi by the arm, and with many soothing assurances, such as are used with dangerous madmen, was leading him away. Luigi followed without resistance. The very moment that the thing was done he had become as docile as a child. For a few seconds Bernegg still stood labouring for breath, and alternately flushing and paling with extraordinary rapidity, then he too disappeared in the crowd. Even in this supreme moment he could not help wishing that Luigi had chosen another manner of doing the thing. An *esclandre* had always been the very thing which he held most in horror.

The two girls turned instinctively and looked into each

other's eyes. On Annie's face there was nothing to be read but a scared astonishment; on Teresina's there was something which Annie felt that she did not understand. It was not astonishment and it was not fright; it was something which at this moment she could not stop to analyse. The bunch of carnations was lying at her feet. She walked over it without seeing it as she blindly made her way between the revolving couples towards the retired corner where since the beginning of the evening Mrs. Brand had been vainly endeavouring to hide her light under a bushel. Her knees were trembling beneath her, so that she told herself that she would never be able to cross the room. Before her eyes there swam a grey cloud; the whole brilliant scene around her had melted into a dim and chaotic jumble of colour. But her mother's diamonds she could still discern; they seemed to her the beacon-light that was leading her. Through the midst of the crowd she stumbled towards the far-off corner, and then stood still.

"Take me away, mother," she said with white lips; "take me away quickly; this is all I can do to-day."

And the mother, who had observed nothing of the scene at the end of the room, looked into her daughter's face and did not require to know more. She rose in her sheltered nook, and, taking Annie by the hand, slipped from the room as unobtrusively as her diamonds made it possible.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE FIRST STAGE.

BEFORE midday on the following day the Brands had reached Terrente, which was to be the first stage on their homeward journey. Their plan was to sleep here to-night and start next morning by the early express. Worn out with fatigue and excitement, Annie lay down on the hotel bed and fell into a heavy sleep. A certain degree of indifference had come over her since last night. She supposed, indeed, that the scene in the Cursalon would have consequences of some sort, but she was physically and mentally far too tired to go into any matter deeply. The thing must be serious, she told herself, but she did not guess how serious it really was. She knew, of course, that such things as duels took place on the Continent, but the idea was to her far-off and indistinct, belonging well-nigh to the region of romance. If she thought of anything distinctly, she thought of courts of law and compensations to pay, forgetting that this was not sober, practical-minded England.

When she awoke from her long sleep the room was beginning to grow dark. The worst of the purely physical fatigue was over; she felt aware of this even before she had opened her eyes. She got off her bed and walked to the window. It had not before occurred to her even to look into the street. Now only she began to awake to her surroundings. The sight of the houses opposite touched her disagreeably; it

seemed strange not to be looking across the green valley to which she had been used for so long. In reality it did not lie more than a dozen miles away, that vine-clad valley set in rocks, and yet for her it was no longer of the same world; it belonged to the irrevocable past.

There was still light enough in the street to see almost distinctly. Annie remained at the window, staring out without curiosity. There was nothing else for her to do. Her mother was no doubt still resting, and her father, according to his habit, had gone out to pick up whatever stray morsels of education he might find lying loose about the place.

The street was fuller now than it had been all day and probably all week, for this was the eve of a feast-day and the hour when people are hastening home to their suppers. The crowd that thronged the thoroughfare of Terrente belonged principally to the shabby sort—shopkeepers who had put up their shutters prematurely in honour of to-morrow, street-sweepers with their brooms tucked under their arms, washerwomen with their baskets of linen that must be delivered before nightfall. A good many hands were stuffed into the shabby sleeves, and a good many heads were trying to retreat between the shoulders belonging to them, for the weather had turned cold overnight. The unwelcome change was being generally remarked upon by the crowd below, as they hastened along shivering and humping their backs, and mixing up a curse upon the cold weather with the greetings they called to each other, like true Italians, as most of them were.

While Annie still stood at the window gazing apathetically at the passers-by, she caught sight among the grey and brown coats below of a brighter-coloured figure that seemed familiar to her. She looked again more carefully; it was the small goatherd of the river-bed whom she knew so well.

The recognition brought with it a pang. That boy belonged to the world which she had just left. It was strange that he should be here ; what possible business could bring him to Terrente ? He was behaving strangely too, as she now became aware, for having gone a little way up the street he turned and came back again, gaped at the front of the hotel for some seconds, again walked away, and presently reappeared among the crowd, straight in front of the entrance, jostled on all sides and still open-mouthed.

Annie had watched his movements keenly. She now opened the window, without quite knowing why she was doing so, and called the boy by his name. He looked up, showed his teeth in token of recognition, and immediately disappeared under the entrance. Annie went to meet him on the staircase, expecting she knew not what. Half-way down she met him. It was a torn sheet of letter-paper which he handed her, and on it a few shaky lines, pitiaibly unlike the Principessa's own handwriting.

"He is going to fight with his comrade to-morrow at sunrise. They have chosen pistols. If anyone can do anything it is you. Come back to me, if you can ; I am alone in my unhappiness."

So scrawled and smeared was the writing that Annie could not get at the sense until she had spelled out the single words. She did so aloud, quite forgetting that this was an hotel staircase, and unaware of the existence of the small boy who stood before her in his scanty rags and with chattering teeth. In the same moment that she understood everything she felt all her strength coming back to her. The last trace of to-day's heavy lethargy vanished as though it had never been. This, at least, meant the end of the passive stage. What was coming might be much worse, but it implied action of some sort. It was with a bright colour in her cheek that she went back to her room to make immedi-

ate preparations for departure. She began mechanically putting her hairbrushes and combs back into her travelling-bag. While she was busied thus she suddenly remembered that of course her father would not let her go, for she knew of his absolute break with the Principessa. She sat down on the nearest chair in order to think out the matter. There was the choice of either defying him openly or of going without his knowledge. As for the first, she felt morally quite strong enough; but the physical strength was on his side, and she knew him well enough to know that he would not shrink from the use of it. If she were locked up in her room with her father sleeping across the door the Principessa would wait in vain. She knew also that to reason with him would be exactly as hopeless as to struggle with him. Therefore the only chance was to go without his knowledge. But for this she must wait until after supper. She looked at the note again. "At sunrise," it said. The drive could not take much more than three hours. Supposing she could start at nine, she would be there soon after midnight. She would still be in time. In time for what? Of that she could form no distinct idea. She knew only that she had to be there at any price. The idea of not going never even occurred to her. It was some days now since she had discovered that implicit obedience does not always answer in life as well as it does in the schoolroom, but it was only to-day that she awoke to the full consciousness of personal independence.

She got up again, and went on making her preparations more deliberately now, counting the money in her purse, laying her hat and gloves where she could easily find them, and putting the rest of the toilet things into her bag.

Mrs. Brand was too tired to go downstairs, for which reason the supper was served in her room. Annie appeared there at eight o'clock, looking so thoroughly rested and

wideawake that Mr. Brand even remarked upon his daughter's improved appearance.

"Beginning to look more like yourself again, eh, Annie?" had been his greeting. "And quite right too. I'm bound to say that I myself am feeling ever so much more like my own person since I've turned my back upon that precious valley and all its inhabitants. Never mind, my girl; we'll make up for this summer yet!"

He was still in the rebound of yesterday's relief. The fried cutlets, too, happened to hit off his taste to a nicety, which increased his good humour, for as a rule nothing could be served crisp enough for Mr. Brand, just as no chair could be stuffed hard enough to satisfy him.

"Bless you, a man likes to know what he's got between his teeth," he had been heard to say; "and he likes to know what he's sitting upon. None of your flabby food and spongy chairs for me."

To sit upon a kitchen stool gnawing a bare bone ought by rights to be more enjoyable to men of this particular constitution of mind than to feast on *vol-au-vent* seated on a damask chair. The want of resistance both about the *vol-au-vent* and the chair cannot fail to act depressingly upon one whose chief pleasure in life is the overcoming of obstacles.

It was the first time that Mr. Brand had even indirectly alluded to the events of the summer before Annie, and she knew thereby that his hottest anger was spent, for, despite the violence of his character, it had ever been his way to be silent about that which most deeply enraged him. He had always been one more given to sulk than to storm.

Annie ate as much supper as she could, telling herself that she had a long night before her, but it was all she could do to listen quietly to her father's exultant talk, while knowing all the time that the minutes were stealing on.

It was drawing very near to nine o'clock when she said at last, desperately:

"We have to get up early, father. Mother should be going to bed."

He broke off in the midst of an harangue.

"To be sure, and so should you. You mustn't lose those roses in your cheeks, mind. We'll be needing them for somebody else."

And Mr. Brand kissed his daughter and went off to bed chuckling in spirit over his neatly turned phrase, as well as over the prophetically seen discomfiture of that old lady in the tumbledown palace when she should receive the announcement of her "sweet Annee's" marriage.

Rankin was in Annie's room, making the preparations for the night.

"Go to my mother," said Annie, promptly; "she is waiting, and I shall not require you."

She put on her hat and jacket, and then sat down to wait until what should appear to be a safe moment. It would not do to wait very long, for the hotel might be closed and there might be no more carriages to be had. When this last idea occurred to her, she rose immediately, feeling that she must be gone, whether the moment was safe or not.

There was no one on the staircase, but in the entrance below the stout figure of the porter filled half the doorway, as he stood with hands in trousers pockets, reviewing the few passers-by that were still abroad. He looked at her with some curiosity as she walked straight past him, then, recognising one of the occupants of the best suite of rooms, made a hasty grab at his cap. The recognition made him feel more curious than ever, and even somewhat disturbed, for surely this was not an hour at which young ladies usually take walks. There was an anxious frown upon his

broad countenance as he watched her disappear up the street, then suddenly the countenance cleared. He had remembered that she was an *Inglese*, and that, of course, explained any amount of eccentricity. There was no further need to bother about the matter.

For some minutes Annie walked in breathless haste and without any regard to direction, thinking only of the possibility of pursuit. Presently she turned into another street and her pace relaxed. She began to look about her and to consider her plan of action. She had seen no cabstand as yet, and the only two vehicles which had passed her had each had an occupant. Evidently Terrente went to bed early. And yet she must have a conveyance at any price. It occurred to her that there had been some fiacres at the railway station when she had arrived here six weeks ago. But at which end of the town was the railway station? She quickened her pace again, walking almost at random and in hopes of some fortunate chance. The solitary figures which the street lamps revealed from time to time upon the pavement were generally huddled in poor shawls. Two men stepping out of a drinking-shop hailed her noisily and followed for some yards. She walked as fast as she was able, annoyed only at the thought that any interruption must mean loss of time. It had not yet occurred to her to feel frightened at anything that might happen to-night.

The solitary figures were getting more solitary when she at length recognised the long white building which she knew to be the railway station. She had been walking the streets for more than an hour now. The night train had come in some minutes ago, and the half-dozen fiacres which was all that Terrente could afford had been lucky to-night, for four of them had already got their fares and were trotting briskly across the square. Two only still remained, and one of these was being laden with luggage. It passed

Annie at a jog-trot, just as she emerged breathless upon the square. She began to run, keeping her eyes fixed upon the one fiacre which still stood at its place. She was within a dozen paces of it when a small old gentleman came down the steps of the building, followed by a porter carrying a portmanteau. Annie tried to call to the driver, but she had no breath remaining. She saw the portmanteau hoisted on to the box and the old gentleman preparing to enter the vehicle. With a spring forward she grasped him by the arm.

"That carriage—is mine," she managed to say, struggling with her want of breath. "I must have—that carriage."

The old gentleman withdrew his foot from the step and looked at her with a mixture of speechless indignation and pure terror. He was small and frail, and to be assaulted by this determined-looking young woman frightened him a good deal.

"Tell him to take your portmanteau off the box. It is I who must have this carriage, not you."

"Pardon me," said the stranger, recovering himself a little. "It is I who have engaged this fiacre."

"I know, but I must have it. I must get to Lancegno to-night."

Here the driver began to take part in the conversation.

"To Lancegno? *Grazie, Signora*," he remarked with a touch of scorn. "My beasts and I have had enough for one day. I will rather take this gentleman to the hotel than spend the night—and such a night, too—upon my seat here."

"I will pay you well if you will take me."

"So will I. I will give you a florin beyond your fare if you take me to the hotel."

"I will give you fifty florins, a hundred florins," and she

began with trembling fingers to pull the money from her purse.

The gaslight burned brightly here, and both the driver and the small old gentleman could see the notes quite plainly. There was a momentary silence of pure astonishment; then the driver, without a word, began to push the portmanteau off the box. Evidently the old gentleman had the good sense to recognise that his side of the case was hopeless, for he waited until the fiacre had got into motion with the mysterious stranger inside before breaking into loud and voluble curses upon the instability of hired drivers and the forwardness of young women, while shaking his two small fists at the departing vehicle.

Once the street-lamps had been left behind, the road became pitch-dark, for there was not so much as a single star in the sky. Fast progress was impossible, though Annie had told the man to make the horses go as hard as they could. She sat upright in the closed carriage, well forward on her seat, like a person who will have to leave it the next minute, and yet she knew quite well that she must sit here for three hours, or possibly four or five. Impatience had never been one of her faults. To-night she made acquaintance with its agonies. In vain she peered out through the darkness for some landmark to tell her how far forward they were on the road. There was nothing to be seen but the black night, and nothing to be heard but a slight rustle upon the pane. Already while she walked the streets a fine icy rain had begun to fall, a rain that felt almost like sleet. When she had sat still for a little time she began to shiver, and remembered that she ought to have put on something warmer than her travelling jacket. It was too dark even to read the face of her watch, and yet from time to time she took it out mechanically and then impatiently put it back in its place. Several times the fiacre

came to a standstill. They had not been gone from Terrente for more than an hour when this happened for the first time; and yet Annie looked out eagerly, in the wild, momentary belief that they had reached their destination. Instead of this she discovered that the driver had dozed off upon the box, and that the tired horses were taking advantage of the circumstance. This happened again and again, and each time Annie looked out for the gate of the Monastero, and each time the man had to be roused and a fresh start to be made.

Once the crow of a cock somewhere hard by gave her a pang of alarm. That meant that the night was waning.

The trees were beginning to grow distinguishable as black masses, and the sky was turning pale in the east, when Annie in truth saw the gate of the Monastero. She gazed at the whitish streak behind the hills with fixed and frightened eyes. That streak signified the sunrise, and it was at sunrise that they were to meet. She would be too late. Too late for what? To say good-bye to the lover of Teresina Bazzanella!

The small, cold rain had ceased to fall; there were chirpings and twitterings in the air and the fluttering of many wings. A cloud of swallows rose from the top of the old stone wall as the worn-out fiacre horses came to their final standstill.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE LAST MOMENT.

THE gate stood ajar and the door of the house was not locked. For the first time in her acquaintance with the Monastero Annie reached the hall without even seeing Giacomo. The whole place had a look of complete desertion, which the uncertain grey light helped to intensify.

Half groping her way through the library she came to the big drawing-room. In the wide, white grate which she had always seen empty as yet, there still smouldered the remains of a log. Before it the Principessa sat with a small iron vessel full of hot coals upon her knee, the *calderino* so dear to the Italian heart. She was not the Principessa whom Annie had known. She sat there bent and shivering, and a glance made it evident that she had been sitting thus all night. Her hair, which Annie had hitherto seen only in shining silver curls, daintily veiled by the lace mantilla, was to-day uncovered and disarranged. The spots where it had grown thin were plainly visible. One white curl had lost its shape entirely, and hung past the ear in a long, meagre wisp. It was a collapse so sudden and entire that Annie stood before her as she might have stood before a stranger. By the light of the candle which burned on the table beside the Principessa she could see that the buttons of her bodice were wrongly fastened. To one who knew the Principessa this said more even than the haggard face

and dull eyes which she turned upon her visitor. The sight of Annie seemed neither to astonish nor rejoice her.

"That is you?" she said, in a tired voice. "Yes, I thought that you would come, but it will make no difference. You might as well have stayed away."

"You told me to come."

"Yes, I told you. There was a moment when I fancied that you could do something. It was only a mad idea. I suppose my brain is weakening. Such things come from old age. It is a terrible thing to grow old, I tell you. Of course you can do nothing."

"Of course I cannot. But cannot Teresina Bazzanella?"

"Teresina Bazzanella—Teresina Bazzanella!" The Principessa repeated the name several times over, shaken apparently with silent laughter, as she cowered over her *calderino*. "The idea of Teresina doing anything! Why, she would shoot him herself if she had money enough to buy a pistol. Do you know her so little?"

"Does she not love him?"

"After her fashion, yes; but she would much rather see him dead than belonging to another woman. She would shoot him through the heart, I tell you, and then she would bury him in a beautiful grave, and every day with her own fingers she would deck it with flowers and weep tears of joy at the thought that at last he belonged to her alone."

"Does he not belong to her now?"

The Principessa started at Annie in dull wonder.

"Are you a woman, or are you a simpleton? Do you not yet understand that he loves you?"

"But is it not because of her that they are fighting? It was because he thought that the other man meant to——"

"Yes, after you had maddened him all the evening. We

Italians are not made of wood. Don't you understand that he *had* to insult the other man? It didn't much matter how, why, or when."

"But, can it be that——"

"Be quiet!" said the Principessa, vehemently, raising her head and looking at Annie with eyes that had suddenly caught fire. "You fool! I tell you that he loves you, and that it is for you that he is fighting. It is *you* who have brought about this thing."

For a full minute she sat upright, measuring Annie with a gaze so full of fury that the girl's own eyes fell before it. Then the excitement passed as it had come. Her attitude relaxed and she bent again over her *calderino*, impatiently pushing back the one long wisp which was for ever falling forward on to her face.

Annie had sat down upon her accustomed chair, and, exhausted with the long, weary night, leant her head back against the moth-eaten cushion. She was not conscious of feeling any especial surprise at what the Principessa had said. It seemed to her that she had known all this even at the very moment when she stood on the hotel staircase, reading the Principessa's note. It could not well be otherwise. She had wanted only to hear it attested in so many plain words—logically explained. It was not her fault if she thought logic safer than instinct. There was no joy in the discovery. She had only learnt that it was she and not the "Roman girl" who was driving him to his possible death.

"Where is he?" she asked after a long silence.

But the Principessa was following her own thoughts.

"Poor Teresina! She will not have been in her bed all night. I can well imagine her sitting and looking out for the news of his death. It will be a blow to her if he escapes. I am not even sure that she will survive it. That woman

has too many nerves to be able to stand many shocks like this; and they must have been strung very highly for a week past, those poor fine-spun nerves. They were even talking yesterday of a beginning of brain fever, but I do not know if it is true."

"Where is he?" repeated Annie.

"Upstairs. You want to say good-bye? You can go. Yes, go and tell him how happy you both might have been if you had not both been determined to choose unhappiness. I have said my good-bye already. Yes, go and tell him. It is a great thing to be young and clever."

Annie rose and went towards the door, followed by the subdued laughter of the old woman with the *calderino*.

With her hand on the curtain she stood still, and asked without turning her head:

"You say I can do nothing?"

"Nothing. It was a foolish thought. It would be dishonour now to withdraw. You can do nothing," repeated the Principessa, impatiently. "But go quickly."

The daylight was beginning to look in at the windows as Annie mounted the carpetless staircase. She had no notion of which way she was to go. For a while she wandered about the open gallery that was still full of the shadows of the night, opening several doors in succession. Then a new sound fell upon her ear. Was somebody crying in one of those dark corners? She went nearer and discovered the yellow terrier, Gyps, sitting before a closed door and whining softly. This must be the room she was looking for.

Luigi, standing with his back to the door, was busied with some papers on a table. Several torn-up sheets lay upon the floor beside him. He was in the act of tearing up another as Annie entered. At the sound of the opening

door he pushed the papers aside. Then he turned and recognised her, and a look of displeasure crossed his face. In this moment he felt only a lively irritation. This was not what he had wished for. He had said good-bye to everything, broken with everything—so he believed. He did not want to be awakened again to the things that belonged to this life. He had thought himself safe. There was but one thing which could be capable of disturbing that peace which during the long hours of this long night had been so laboriously attained. He was not thankful to see her; it was exactly from her that he wanted to fly. Some evil spirit must have brought her hither. Sternly and coldly he asked her why she had come.

“To ask for your pardon. I should have come sooner if I had known, but I did not know of the duel until your mother sent me word.”

“What made her send you word? Was it my mother who told you to come to me now?”

“No; it was I who wanted to come. I wanted you to know the truth. She says that you are fighting because of me. I did not know that before.”

Luigi's fingers were again moving among the papers on the table. It was evident that he wished to avoid looking at her. His face was no longer quite calm. With his foot he impatiently pushed aside the yellow terrier who was trying to elicit a sign of notice.

“It cannot matter whom I am fighting for. It would have been better if you had not come.”

“No, it would not have been better,” said Annie, and, though she had felt almost quite strong a moment before, the tears suddenly rose to her eyes and began to wet her cheeks. “I had to come. I knew that you were going to a great danger, and I had to see you. It is I who have brought about this thing.”

Luigi was still busy with the papers. At the sound of the change in her voice he looked up quickly and his own face altered. For one moment longer he struggled with himself, then, coming forward, he took her into his arms, gently and reverently—far more quietly than he had ever done anything in his life. There was about him something new to-day—something which Annie had never before seen. He spoke without gestures, almost without the customary emphasis on particular words.

With her forehead leaning against his shoulder she stood in silence, sobbing helplessly. He waited without impatience until she had a little recovered herself. Then, raising her face, he kissed her on the lips twice, without passion, but with an infinite tenderness. No word of explanation was said. Neither the other man nor the other woman was mentioned between them. The moment was too grave for any small reminiscences, and neither were they wanted, since each understood everything without any such things, for these are the moments when even wilfully blinded eyes see with terrible clearness.

Having kissed her, he released her gently.

"It may be that you think I had no right to do this," he said, in a different tone. "But you would think otherwise if you knew everything. This has been our last farewell."

Annie searched his face with her frightened eyes.

"Do not some duels end well?" she asked at last.

"Yes, very many," said Luigi, with a certain hesitation. He walked a few steps away from her and came back again, frowning at the floor like a man who is debating something within himself.

"Then may not this one end well?"

"This one cannot end well."

"I understand nothing about duels," she said, still scan-

ning his face with a growing feeling of panic. "You are going to fight with pistols, are you not?"

"Yes."

"And each of you shoots once?"

Luigi took up one of the papers that were lying on the table, looked at it for a moment blankly, then, dropping it again, turned towards Annie. He had evidently come to a resolution.

"It is better that you should know the whole truth. This is a moment at which there should not be even the shadow of a veil between us. We must not part with a false hope blinding us. I will tell you everything. But you must swear not to let my mother know."

"Yes, I swear it."

He went on, speaking more quickly:

"Many duels end well—in fact, most of them do. A scratch on the cheek, an injured hand, that is generally all the result. But I have never had patience with these caricatures of duels. To my mind a deadly insult can only be paid for with life itself. My comrades have always known what my ideas on the subject were; perhaps this is one of the reasons why I have never been challenged before. But Bernegg has no choice, of course. As the person challenged, I have the choice of the weapons. I have chosen pistols. The first shot, too, is mine by rights—those are our laws of duelling. I renounced this right, but in return I have made my own conditions. We stand at fifteen paces' distance, with the barrier between us, and each of us fires three shots."

Annie listened with strained attention, trying to follow his words, and yet not comprehending everything. She could not at this moment clearly realise what fifteen paces' distance would look like. It seemed to convey no idea to her mind.

"Cannot the three shots miss?"

"The two first, perhaps; the third cannot. We have the right to advance."

"That means——"

"That means simply that it does not lie within the bounds of human probability that both of us should remain alive. We walk up to the barrier; the last shot is fired at the distance of a foot—of an inch, maybe."

Annie stood quite quiet and considered his words, and as she went over them in her mind a feeling of despair settled down slowly upon her. She understood now why he was so quiet and so different from what she had known, and she understood also why he had been tearing up the papers.

"I understand," she said aloud. "Yes, now I think I understand everything. You have done a terrible thing."

"Do you think so? I could not have done otherwise. If anyone approves of my action it should be you. Is it not your own principle to do entirely whatever one does?" And he tried to smile, but it would not do.

"You have done something terrible," she said again.

"I have told you this only in order that you may see that I have the right to say everything to you at this moment. I am speaking to you as a man on his deathbed speaks. Whatever the end is, we can never meet again. To-day I shall either be dead or else a murderer in your eyes—I shall have forfeited my right to happiness. There is no other issue. We must certainly part; but before this you must know that I have loved you with the whole strength of my soul."

He turned his head quickly; there was a step in the passage.

"They are coming; I have no more time."

He spoke again in the same short tone in which he had first addressed her, and with the air of a man who had suddenly recollected himself. Then, turning away, he hastily finished his arrangements on the table. Annie watched him without moving from the spot on which she stood, not aware of any especial pain. Even the tears on her cheeks had dried up long ago.

The step in the passage came nearer, and then stopped. There was a gentle rap at the door, so soft and low that it sounded like a secret signal.

Gyps began to bark indignantly, and Luigi turned from the table, and taking his sword from a chair hard by, buckled it on without once looking towards Annie. He took his cap in his hand and walked straight past her. When he was two paces from the door he came back again and seized her in his arms.

"This is the last moment, Annetta," he whispered in her ear; and for the first time to-day his voice faltered. His face was close to hers; she could see that there were tears in his eyes, and that his lips were working. With all his strength he held her, pressing one long passionate kiss upon her unresponsive lips—a kiss that was as fire to water beside the kiss he had given her five minutes ago—then, pushing her from him, he went quickly from the room.

Several minutes passed, while Annie still stood dazed and breathless from that wild embrace. This was indeed the Luigi she had always known. She waited for some time; the footsteps of several people descending the staircase still reached her ear, and then the door of the house closed. It was almost broad daylight by this time. She left the room slowly, and slowly walked along the corridor. Gyps, trotting uneasily from door to door, met her here again. The first sunbeam had just caught the highest line

of the roof, but the enclosed garden below, where stood the stone pavilion, was still as gloomy as the bottom of a well. It had always seemed to Annie to be a reservoir of chilliness. The sun would not reach it till midday, and would leave it again in less than an hour.

CHAPTER XXV.

WAITING.

THE Principessa was still sitting as Annie had left her, only that instead of nursing the *calderino* upon her knee she had a mother-o'-pearl rosary twisted between her fingers. She glanced at the girl with furtive inquiry, and Annie saw that the bitterness was gone from her face. Something of deprecation lay in the glance. She had said that Annie could do nothing, and she knew it to be so, and yet she could not forbear that silent question.

In response Annie smiled a wretched little smile. It seemed easier just then to smile than to speak. By the Principessa's face she knew quite well that the steps on the staircase and the closing of the big door had been heard and marked.

She sat down on the same chair on which she had before been sitting. The Principessa went on twisting the beads between her fingers, although it was evident that she was not praying. Annie found herself stupidly wondering what her first remark would be. When it came at last it was quite unexpected. The Principessa asked her without a shade of interest whether she had been able to sleep in the carriage.

"No," replied Annie.

"Would you not lie down and sleep now?"

"No, I cannot sleep."

"You must be very tired," said the Principessa, still speaking in the lifeless manner that was so unlike herself.

"Yes, very tired," said Annie, thankful for the indifferent remarks. Nothing else would have been bearable just then.

"I suppose it was raining?"

"I suppose so."

"Will you not take off your hat?"

Annie put up her hand. She had not before noticed that she had her hat on. Neither had the Principessa.

"That hat is not becoming to you," said the Principessa, with perfect indifference. "I like you better in large hats. You should get a hat with a broader brim."

"I suppose so," said Annie again. To talk about her hat was, at any rate, better than silence, even if the answers did not always happen to be the right ones. She hoped the Principessa would find something more to say, but just now there occurred the first pause. The Principessa seemed suddenly to have forgotten all about Annie and her hat. She sat brooding, with her eyes upon the ashes in the grate, and the minutes began to pass. It was too soon, indeed, for the tension of expectation to have begun, and yet the stillness was disquieting. Gyps, who had crept into the room at Annie's heels, sat down close to the grate, shivering and staring disconsolately into the ashes.

"Is the place far from here?" It was Annie's voice that broke the silence.

"I cannot tell you—on the other side of the valley, I believe."

And again there was a pause.

This time the Principessa spoke.

"How is your mother? Did the waters of Lancegno benefit her?"

"Yes, I think so. Are you sure that it is on the other side of the valley?"

"He told me so. It is strange that I should never have seen your mother. Of course I shall never see her now. She cannot be like you."

"Perhaps not."

The candle was still flickering on the table, though it was no longer wanted. Annie blew it out. Both she and the Principessa still spoke from time to time, but the remarks were getting fewer, and the pauses longer. It was becoming more difficult not to think. The stupor which Annie had brought with her from that room upstairs began to give way to the first stages of restlessness. Each of these women knew perfectly why the other was sitting here and what she was waiting for, and yet they even avoided each other's eyes. There was one spot on the wall to which their glances were ever returning—it was the place where hung the water-colour portrait of the black-eyed lad; but they looked towards it furtively, and in fear of each other, each waiting until the other's eyes were turned away, in order to look again, and even the old woman reddening when she thought herself discovered.

But this was only at first. After a time the Principessa began to lose sight of Annie's presence, and returned to her beads. Annie sat and watched her, and wished that she too had something wherewith to busy her fingers. Thus the minutes trailed into an hour. Annie wondered for how many more hours they would sit thus, and in what shape the end would come. Who would bring the Principessa the news? Would it be Giacomo or the small goatherd? Would they break it to her gently, or fling it full into her face?

The second hour had begun when Giacomo brought in two cups of coffee. It had been a private inspiration of his

own, and both the Principessa and Annie blessed him in their hearts, not because of the coffee, but because of the interruption. Annie found that she could swallow only a mouthful, but the Principessa emptied her cup, and as she put it down again she straightened herself a little in her chair, as though the hot stuff had brought her a momentary strength.

"It is wrong to despair," she said abruptly, and Annie could see that a faint tinge of colour had come to her face. "God is merciful. He is not gone to a certain death. These duels often end without a wound on either side."

She looked across at Annie intently, imploringly, as though seeking for a reflection of her own hope upon that other face. But Annie could only blankly return the gaze. Knowing what she knew, the mother's hopefulness stabbed her to the heart. Meeting her eyes, the Principessa seemed to grow uneasy.

"God is merciful," she said once again, but more faintly this time. Then she sank into her former position. The flicker had gone out. More and more quickly the beads began to pass between the icy fingers to which the *calderino* had not been able to bring a shade of warmth.

The waiting began again. By this time the silence was no longer unbearable. The attempt to disguise the situation had been given up long ago. Gyps, still staring at the ashes, began to whimper under his breath. He, too, seemed to be waiting for something.

"I could kill that dog!" said the Principessa fiercely, raising her head for one moment. "I beseech of you to turn him out."

Annie rose from her chair and did as she was bid, without interrupting the course of her thoughts. All along she had been busied with torturing her mind for the possibility

of a hope. Ever and ever again she went over the matter. Three shots, he had said, and fifteen paces' distance, and if the two first shots missed they would walk up to the barrier. She wondered what the barrier would be like—where they would take the materials from to erect it. Had she known that the "barrier" was no more than a line marked upon the ground by the seconds, she would, probably, for some indefinite reason, have felt an increase of despair. It was no use telling herself that a duel was only a lingering remnant of mediæval absurdities—that in a hundred years a far more rational code of honour would be established, even in Austria; it could not matter to her what might be in a hundred years, or even what might be to-morrow; it was with to-day alone that she had to reckon—with this day and with this hour that was. The oftener she passed the circumstances in review, the more impossible did it seem to her that both should escape. It was signed and sealed that one must be a dead man, and the other a murderer. Her eyes wandered to the two white urns upon the chimney-piece. She knew that the right-hand one contained the customary printed announcements of the betrothals in the Roccатели family during the last half-century, and that the left-hand one contained the announcements of the deaths. If everything had gone smoothly, then a new printed paper would have been laid into the right-hand urn; but now it was more likely that the paper would be black-bordered, and would be put into the left-hand urn. What was it that she had been unhappy about only a few days ago? Because of that understanding between her father and the Principessa? To what absolute unimportance all those small excitements had shrunk beside the naked truths of Life and Death!

When the third hour began Annie again got up from her chair, and looked out of each of the windows in turn.

The Principessa had not spoken since she had told her to turn out the dog. Beside the third window stood the harmonium. Annie sat down and passed her fingers over the keys. Perhaps they would do as well as the rosary. But having played only a few chords, she broke off with a sense of annoyance. Without thinking of what she had been doing, she had stumbled into the standard piece of Miss Bellew's establishment—Beethoven's "Funeral March." She did not want to play that just now. For want of something else she began to play scales, completely out of tune. She had not played more than two when, hearing a sound, she looked round and saw the Principessa already at the door, walking stealthily, as though to escape notice.

"Do not stop me," she said, as Annie rose quickly. "I cannot any longer live in this room. It is two hours now—more than two hours. It is time. I am going to meet him. Do not stop me." And she looked at Annie with defiance in her haggard eyes.

"I am going with you," said Annie, and followed her from the room.

As they stepped out of the gate together the Principessa stood still and looked about her without a word, but with an irrepressible astonishment printed upon her features. Standing there in the open daylight, with her disordered white hair uncovered and her wild black eyes passing swiftly from side to side, she looked as though she belonged to some world different from this one. For a full minute she stood lost in the first trance of astonishment, then, leaning upon Annie's arm, began to descend the rocky path.

"This is the right road, is it not?" she said after a time. "I have not been upon it for twenty-one years, you know. You must lead me. To-day I have broken my vow, but God will forgive me."

What with the roughness of the path and the Principessa's thin shoes, which had never been designed for anything more rugged than the floor of a room, their progress was slow. But she would make no halt, although obviously the unwonted motion was exhausting her terribly. At almost every step she looked about her in amazement. Every turn of the road awoke some long-buried reminiscence.

"There used to be a group of shrubs here," she began after a silence. "Where can they have gone to? Surely it is not possible that they have grown into those trees I see there? What am I talking of? Of course it is possible. That was twenty-one years ago.

"But where can that magnificent chestnut have gone to?" she broke out again presently. "It used to stand at this corner, and it made me a green tent for sitting under on summer afternoons. It is gone, I do believe. Ah, well, it was old; it had to make way for the young ones. I, too, am old. May I lean more heavily on your arm, Annetta? My feet grow feeble. The road itself is not the same as it used to be. I believe that even rocks have fallen from their places. It all has a strange face to me."

It was only when at length they emerged on to the river-bed that the Principessa stood still for some moments. This was the first full view that they had had of the valley, and for the first time, too, Annie became aware that snow had fallen in the past night. The valley itself was still untouched, but every hill around wore a crown of snow, which the morning sun made dazzling. Down there it was still glowing autumn, but up above it was winter already—a new-born, spotless winter which had taken even the swallows by surprise before their travelling arrangements were completed. Everywhere—upon the rocks and among the tree-branches—excited feathered companies were to be met with,

of which not one was sitting still, and of which all were in a fever of impatience to be off southwards.

The Principessa looked only at one thing. In the moment that she stood still her eyes had fixed themselves upon a large square of white which shone across the valley, almost as plainly as the snow above.

"So that is it?" she said, sharply. "That much-talked-of Curhaus, that accursed roof under which it has all happened. I do not want to look at it any more; come on, I beg you."

The sound of church-bells floated across to them from the other side.

"What are they ringing for?" she asked, impatiently. "What day is this? Ah, truly, is not this the feast of the Nativity? I had well-nigh forgotten it. The people are going to Mass. I have always heard that a feast is a day of joy, but I believe it is not true."

Her eyes had long ago sought the distant road, and while she talked she scanned the uncertain line unceasingly. There was nothing moving upon it, for by this time all those who could leave their homes were within the church walls.

Beside the small, half-buried chapel the Principessa halted again. She contemplated the picture within for some time in perplexed silence.

"Is this indeed my old friend Saint Sebastian? It seems to be his face, but the stone had only reached to his knees when I knew him, now his hands up to his neck. This is terrible. I always said that he was a monster. But I believe he will hear me." And, putting her hand on Annie's arm, she knelt down upon the stones in front of the chapel.

Never had Annie envied anyone as she envied the Principessa while she watched her now. To pray must be an

infinite relief, but she knew that the effort would be useless ; there was no room in her soul for anything but suspense.

After a very few minutes she saw that the Principessa was sinking forward against the stone. Having prevailed upon her to rise from her knees, Annie led her towards the house close by.

The woman, dressed in her Sunday clothes, was sitting upon the one chair of the apartment with her child at her breast. He could not well wait for his breakfast until she was back from church. As the Principessa, leaning upon Annie's arm, stumbled across the threshold, she rose in wide-eyed astonishment. Could this be true? The Principessa, the real, bodily Principessa, outside the walls of the Monastero, and under her own humble roof? If Saint Sebastian had scrambled out of his stony tomb outside and walked straight into her house, bristling with all his arrows, it would not have astonished her more completely than this. She broke into respectfully welcoming words and smiles, hastily dusting the chair the while, in utter disregard of her best apron. The Principessa sank on it without a word of thanks. Her hands trembled, and she was breathless.

"It is a terrible thing to grow old," she grumbled between her teeth.

The woman talked on for some minutes, giving vent to her delight, then suddenly she broke off. She had discovered that neither of the ladies seemed to be aware of her presence. She looked from one face to the other, and began to understand that something was happening of which she knew nothing. The *bambino* set up a howl. Snatching him up again, she retreated into a corner of the room and sat down with him upon the floor. The room became quite still again ; outside the rabbits were hopping and scampering upon the wooden floor. The last tones of the

church-bells died away in the air. Annie leant against the window-frame. Her head was aching unbearably. She began to wish madly for an ending—any sort of ending—to this agony. The Principessa was still struggling with physical faintness. From out of the shadowy corner behind the bed the wide eyes of the *bambino's* mother watched her in awe-struck curiosity. After a time there was a long breath drawn, and, rising from the ground, the woman laid the child in its cradle and slipped quietly from the room.

It was not many minutes later that the door opened again and Luigi, white as death, walked straight up to his mother. Kneeling down at her feet, he laid his hand upon her knees and burst into a passion of tears.

The sun had not yet quite risen when Signor Molinetti and Herr Plenn met at the door of the room occupied by Lieutenant Bernegg. There had been some slight difficulty in securing seconds for both sides, owing to the fact that Prince Roccattelli and his comrade were the only officers staying at Lancegno, while for a man not wearing uniform these matters are apt to be attended by certain inconveniences. A day's delay had thus been entailed. It was Signor Molinetti and Herr Plenn who had consented to act for Bernegg: the former readily, seeing that some excitement was promised, the latter not quite so readily. The conditions of this duel did not suit the peaceable spirit of the Bajazzo, and but for Signor Molinetti, it is probable that he would have retired at the last moment. The spot fixed upon was at some distance from the Curhaus, in a valley through which no road passed. The pistols were to be supplied by Prince Roccattelli's seconds.

It was Signor Molinetti, of course, who undertook to knock at the door. There was no immediate response, but both the seconds had been more than punctual, so neither

was there any especial reason for hurry. They took a turn up the passage together, then came back and stood waiting before the door. Signor Molinetti knocked again and lent a listening ear, but nothing moved inside. A slight surprise began to appear upon both faces.

"He cannot be asleep, surely," said Herr Plenn in wonder.

"Or else have run away," suggested the other, with a shadow of a grin. It was to-day the old gentleman who seemed inclined to make jokes, rather than the professional Bajazzo.

He pulled out his watch and looked at it; there was not very much time to be lost now. He knocked again, more vigorously, in disregard of the slumbers of other patients right and left, but still without response.

"This will not do," he said, decisively. "We cannot be late." Whereupon he took upon himself to turn the handle of the door. He found that it was not locked, and resolutely walked in.

Within the same minute Herr Plenn, who was waiting in the passage, heard a piercing shriek and ran into the room. Signor Molinetti was standing beside the bed, not able to speak, but waving his arms in pantomimic gestures and making the most frightful grimaces.

Bernegg was not asleep, nor had he run away, but he was lying dead in his bed with his hands clenched convulsively upon his breast.

"I knew that he would die of heart-disease," was Doctor Wagner's remark at the close of the inquest, "but he need not have died quite so soon as this. Mental excitement and iron baths were the two things which I told him to avoid. He doesn't seem to have avoided either, and he has had to pay the penalty."

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE SECOND BALL AT FARRINGTON.

It was April, and again the stately apartments of Farringdon Hall were alive with music and lights. The second ball given by Mr. Brand under his own roof was very magnificent, though scarcely more magnificent than the first had been just one year ago. To an ignorant eye the scene presented was much the same, but there were no ignorant eyes here to-night. Nobody had slept at the village inn this time, and there was no danger of any ill-natured insinuations being circulated with regard to the source from which the guests had been supplied. Everybody present not only knew everybody else personally and intimately, but could also have stood an examination upon the pedigree of each of his fellow-guests.

Mr. Brand, in a new evening coat and new gold studs, was too happy to speak much, but moved incessantly from room to room, treading as heavily as though he were tramping the high-road, and, yet believing himself to be walking upon clouds. The evening was to him an ever-repeated peregrination. In the first drawing-room there was Sir George Claverstone to be seen, talking to Miss Nelton, and trying the while to look as though it was the most natural thing in the world for him to be there. In the billiard-room the Honourable Mr. Paton was advising a neighbour as to the purchase of a hunter; in the supper-room, a big man with

white eyelashes, whom Mr. Brand understood to be distantly related to a duke, was handing an ice to the fair-haired Jenny Linwood, while in the dancing-room hard by various ladies and gentlemen with most satisfactory-sounding names were revolving to the sound of a splendidly executed waltz. But this was not all. In the boudoir beyond the dancing-room there was the best thing of all to be seen—viz. the pink-faced Lord Collingswood exchanging reminiscences with an old lady in grey satin and with shining silver curls.

Over each of the ever-shifting pictures Mr. Brand would gloat in turn, unable to refrain at moments from rubbing his huge hands together, or from grinning vaguely at one or the other of his guests in the overflowing fulness of his heart, for his joy was just as vigorous and coarse-grained as any other of his qualities. From time to time there came a pause, when, leaning his broad back against the wall, he did nothing but stare. It was the fulfilment of his dream that he was staring at, of the dream which had been dreamed by the ragged boy who forty years ago had lain in watch beside the big gate in order to see "the Squire's" carriage pass out. "I said that I'd do it, and I've done it," he sometimes muttered audibly. Presently, rousing himself, he would make his way back to the boudoir in order to assure himself once more that Lord Collingswood had really not escaped in the meantime. A passing glance at Polly's diamonds served as refreshment *en route*.

It had not been without a final struggle that the county had succumbed. The fact that the self-made man's daughter was about to marry a foreign prince had still left Blankshire society almost unshaken. It had required the appearance of the bridegroom's mother to strike the final blow. Some of the ultra-Conservatives had even then declared that they were not going to capitulate, but from the

moment that Lord Collingswood, to his mingled delight and consternation, had discovered in the Principessa an old acquaintance for whom his heart had beat somewhat stormily in the far-distant days in which he had been attached to the English Embassy at St. Petersburg, the battle was virtually gained. In utter ignorance of what was coming, the former *attaché* had received a note ordering him to call immediately at Farrington. He had gone in perplexity, and had returned two hours later "all of a heap," as the sarcastic Major Morris put it. The old charm, so long forgotten, had proved too much for him, in spite of her white hairs and his own.

Once the leader had struck his colours there was no more resistance worth speaking of. After all, this past year had shown that the total elimination of Farrington left rather a large blank in the county. The first horror of seeing the place in the hands of a *nouveau riche* had had time to wear off, and it was just possible, too, that the first keenness of the grief with which the late possessor had been mourned had begun to do the same. For the elder people it was tantalising to hear of the great improvements in the once so familiar house, without being able to judge of them personally, while the young ones could not help being moved by reports of the new and splendid tennis-grounds which seemed eminently suited for the giving of garden parties, for the county was not so rich in opportunities of gaiety as to let such things appear of small consequence. Mr. Brand did not know it, but in reality the Chinese wall, though still bearing so proud a front, had been tottering just a very little ever since that first ball, which in the bitterness of his disappointment he had dubbed a complete failure. In their heart of hearts many of the guests who were enjoying themselves at the millionaire's cost to-night secretly blessed Lord Collingswood for having given them the lead over this for-

midable fence. It had lately become the fashion to remember other instances in which self-made men had been received into society, without anything very terrible happening in consequence. Even in the ball-room to-night such histories were being exchanged at suitable moments, by way of mutual encouragement, and for the dispersing of any remains of social scruples which might still be disturbing some ultra-sensitive mind.

"I assure you that my brother-in-law actually got quite fond of him," Mrs. Linwood was saying to Mrs. Haldane, in allusion to a retired shirtmaker who once upon a time had made his way *à la* Mr. Brand.

"Strange things do certainly happen," was Mrs. Haldane's remark. "Now, I never could have believed that I should live to see these rooms done up with damask hangings. There is no denying that they *do* look quite different from what they used to, and you can't call anything in bad taste, either. I always said that the place only needed money. These big houses become absurd if they are not lived in by rich people."

"It's a pity he's so clumsy," said Mrs. Linwood, watching Mr. Brand through her eyeglass. "But at least he has an honest face. In one sense he might almost be called a fine man."

"Well, at any rate, he must possess a most uncommon strength of will and energy."

"More, certainly, than poor Fred Alleyne ever had. I wonder, by-the-by, if he is still alive?"

"Hardly, unless the Australian climate has worked wonders. After all, it would only be a deliverance for him and for his friends too. I don't believe that he ever would have come to any good."

"Neither do I," said Mrs. Linwood.

At the other side of the room Lady Malvern, who had

boldly sat down beside her hostess, could not detach her eyes from the face of the Principessa.

"That is the nose which I *ought* to have had," she confided to Mrs. Brand; "the nose which I probably should have had, if that moon-struck great-grandfather of mine had not lost his heart to a snub-nosed creature! The sight of that face over there brings home to me all the more cruelly what it is that I have lost. But for that piece of folly I could have rivalled her easily, while, as matters stand, I cannot even show myself beside her. Fancy losing one's heart to a snub!"

Mrs. Brand could only smile faintly in response, and attempt to shield her own poor little nose behind her fan, painfully aware that it belonged unmistakably to the order which was being held up for execration—a circumstance which, to do her justice, Lady Malvern had, in the heat of her righteous indignation, completely overlooked.

Many other eyes besides those of Lady Malvern were turned in the direction of the Principessa, for although the bride in her wedding-dress was very good to look at, there was no denying that she shared the honours of the evening with her white-haired, black-eyed mother-in-law. There was no one present who could quite resist the brilliancy of the Italian smile and the grace of the Southern address, and yet not one of the guests knew that this bewitching old woman who had undertaken the duties of hostess for to-night was no longer quite what she had been but a few months ago. The white curls were faultlessly ordered, and the dress far more costly than any she had worn for years, but there were lines in the beautiful face which had not been there before that day of last September on which the first snow of the winter had fallen. At stray moments, not otherwise occupied, there would pass over her face the look

of a person who has seen a ghost and who has never quite recovered from the fright.

She had consented to come to England for the wedding and the festivities that were to follow, but from the first she had made her return to the Monastero a condition to this consent.

"My friend, I know very well that you would like to keep me here," she had said to Mr. Brand; "and what you would like best of all would probably be to put me in a golden cage, and place a board above it on which it is distinctly to be read that here a live Italian princess is to be seen. You are right from your point of view, but it will not do. These things are no longer for me. I have grown too unused to sleep in such well-made beds as yours are, and I believe that I should no longer be able to digest such nourishing food. I need my grey prison in the hills. Let me go, and I swear that I shall visit you once every year in order to freshen up your prestige, in case it should require it; but I do not believe that it will, for these English do not do things by halves."

And Mr. Brand had consented to let her go, half in disappointment and half in relief, almost suspecting himself of the weakness of once more erecting that altar which upon a certain day of the past autumn he had in the heat of his indignation been strong enough to overturn.

"They say it was a *mariage de convenance*," somebody in the supper-room remarked.

"Probably they say right," decided the thin, brown major. "Nothing, at any rate, could be more convenient to both parties."

"And yet they look as if they were very fond of each other," sighed Ada Nelson softly, as she gazed across the room.

"And she looks quite nice," admitted the fair-haired Jenny Linwood.

"There is no use in denying that the wonders worked by education are extraordinary," began Mr. Haldane, clearing his throat for an address, and beginning to bring his white eyelashes into motion. Fortunately for the company, Jenny Linwood came to the rescue.

"There is a great deal too much said about the vulgarity of self-made men," she decided. "They are not nearly so bad, after all—when one has got over the first unpleasantness."

"Perhaps you think it a pity that Mr. Brand has not got a son instead of a daughter," the major remarked in a sardonic aside, upon which Miss Linwood tossed her fair head and gave him a withering glance.

But Mr. Haldane was not yet discouraged.

"It is impossible to refuse our tribute to the results of honest labour," he began once more, "just as it is impossible to avoid reflecting upon the folly of spendthrifts."

Ada Nelson sighed softly. In her secret heart there still existed a tolerably soft place for the spendthrift in question, although fortunately her mind was far too well regulated to permit of her imagining that her heart was broken. Since it could not be Freddy, it would probably have to be somebody else. Her mother was almost certain to find something suitable; and, to judge from the look of that couple over there, there was no reason why an arranged marriage should not turn out quite ideally.

To those who had known Luigi before the last 8th of September, there was a change in him also, almost as great as the change in his mother. His brows had grown graver, and something of the boyish eagerness was gone, never to return. He was as perfectly happy as a man can be, but he had entered upon his happiness with far less of headlong impetuosity than he himself would have thought possible. There are some things which, when once seen near, leave

their mark for ever, and these things generally mean the ending of the first stage of youth, as well as of many of its follies, but also of some of its delights.

As the Principessa had foreseen, it was Luigi's intention to continue in the Austrian army. He had made a solemn promise to his young wife not to begin reforming the world on a large scale until ten more years should have passed. In the meantime he meant to see what could be done "close at hand," as Annie put it.

She looked radiant in her wedding-dress to-night, but scarcely quite so radiant as her father in those ecstatic moments in which he would clap his son-in-law on the shoulder and, in the hearing of all bystanders, apostrophise him as "Luigi, my boy!" For him there was no cloud upon the joy of to-night, while for her there existed one slight misgiving, from which since the day of her betrothal she had never been quite free, and which an incident of this evening had stirred into new life. She knew that the evening post had brought to the Principessa a letter—that was the whole of the incident—and the postmark told her that it was from Rome. They had not been alone together since, but Annie could not quite suppress a sense of uneasy curiosity.

Late in the evening she went to the dressing-room to have her lace put to rights. The Principessa was there, settling her curls before the mirror, and at the same time keeping up an animated conversation with three other ladies.

"Come into the passage," she said to Annie, as she passed out. "I must speak to you."

When they were alone in the passage she turned to Annie.

"I had a letter from Rome to-day."

"Yes, I know. Was it from Teresina?"

"No, but it was about her. I can only tell you the mat-

ter quite shortly now. You know that lately I have revived correspondence with several of my Roman acquaintances. It seemed the only way of keeping Teresina within sight. But nobody could tell me more than that she was not with her family, and that the Contessa Ardilio was likewise not in Rome. Well, quite lately one of my correspondents learnt by chance that the Contessa Ardilio had rented a cottage far out on the Campagna. She went to visit her, and took luncheon with her. There was another person in the house—a small, quiet, yellow person, with black eyes, who looked middle-aged, and with a cap on her head, for her hair was shaved—and to whom the Contessa spoke as though she were a child, and who gave the answers that a child might have given. My friend tells me that she never once smiled, but sat quite still, looking in front of her, like a person who is trying to remember something.”

Annie stared with wide, horror-stricken eyes.

“Teresina?” she said below her breath.

The Principessa nodded.

“I had heard before that she would never quite get over the brain fever. Do you remember my telling you that her nerves would not survive the blow? If Luigi had been shot it would have been otherwise. Poor Mella! It is indeed a change for her! Her ‘white dove’ is still as black as a raven, but her ‘gentle lamb’ has really become gentle now, and really is a lamb. I was waiting to hear that she was dead, but this does almost as well. Do not tell me that you are crying, foolish child?”

Annie knew that it was foolish. “She would rather see him dead than belonging to another woman.” She could never forget that the Principessa had said these words. It was the thoughts awakened by them that had been the one spot upon her happiness. So long as Teresina was alive and in possession of all her powers, would she ever be able to

feel that Luigi belonged entirely to herself? This news was a deliverance, and yet, despite all logic, the tears would not let themselves be immediately suppressed.

"After all, she was fond of him too," she managed to whisper.

"Yes, she was fond of him, and, now that I know her to be harmless, I can forgive her even for this. They are looking for us, Annetta; we must go back again to them."

And the two Principessas—the old one and the young one—together re-entered the ball-room, just as, for the fiftieth time in the course of that evening, Mr. Brand was repeating to himself:

"I said I'd do it, and I've done it!"



THE END.

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